Ellery Queen's Anthology

FALL-WINTER 1978 $1.95 VOLUME 36

1 SHORT NOVEL
REX STOUT
(and NERO WOLFE)

4 NOVELETS
MICHAEL INNES
HUGH PENTECOST
BARRY PEROWNE
JOHN PIERCE

12 SHORT STORIES
ISAAC ASIMOV
MICHAEL GILBERT
EDWARD D. HOCH
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RUTH RENDELL
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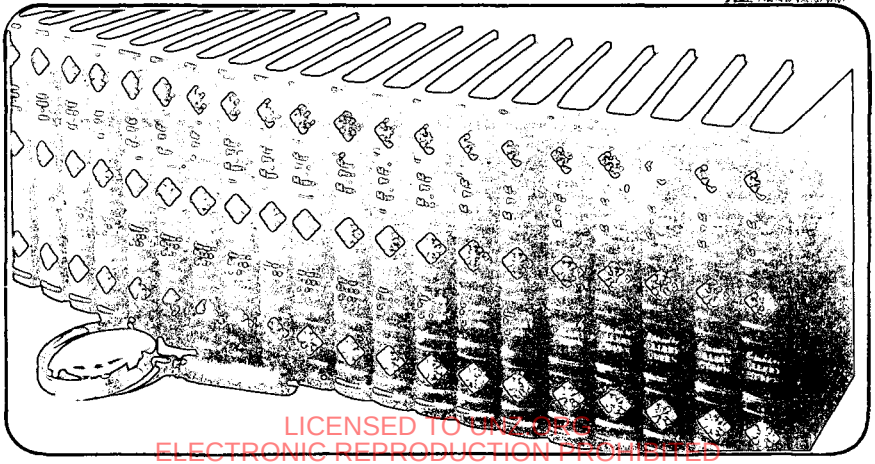

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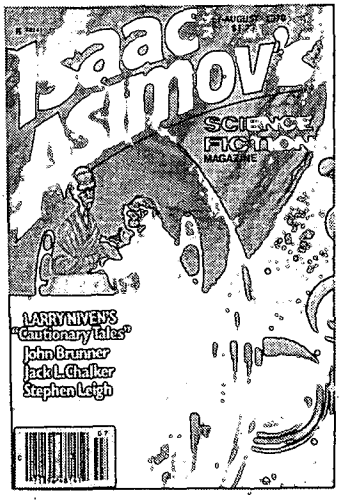

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ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

FALL-WINTER 1978

EDITED BY "Ellery Queen"

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 LEXINGTON AVENUE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

Most of us are familiar with the phrase "the Napoleon of crime." Sherlock Holmes used it in *The Final Problem* (the last story in MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES) as a sobriquet for "ex-Professor Moriarty, a mathematical celebrity."

If there can be a Napoleon of crime, surely there can be a Napoleon of mystery and a Napoleon of detection. Holmes described Professor Moriarty, his archenemy and archrival, as "a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order." Whether Holmes realized it or not (judge for yourself—he considered Moriarty his "intellectual equal"), Holmes was also describing himself—and all The Great Detectives who followed him.

In this collection we offer you some of the Napoleons of detection—Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, Michael Gilbert's Inspector Petrella, Isaac Asimov's the Black Widowers and Henry, Michael Innes' Sir John Appleby, Ellery Queen's EQ—and some of the Napoleons of mystery—Hugh Pentecost, Ruth Rendell, Edward D. Hoch, Edmund Crispin, Patricia McGerr, Christianna Brand, Barry Perowne.

But perhaps you think of Napoleon as a delicious pastry. Well, the stories in this anthology are detective desserts, crime confections, and mystery meringues. Or you think of Napoleon as a gold piece: the stories are 24-carat criminological coins. Perhaps Napoleon brings to mind the color—surely these stories are colorful; or the card game—surely these stories are entertaining, and there is always a high stake involved. And like most good games, the stories are exciting and competitive. So we ask you, in Sherlock Holmes's words, "to break through the veil which [shrouds]" the seventeen mysteries in this collection, and become yourself a Napoleon of detection.

Forward march!

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Rex Stout

Kill Now — Pay Later

Peter Vassos came to the old brownstone on West 35th Street three times a week to shine Nero Wolfe's and Archie Goodwin's shoes. Pete the bootblack was a friend. So when Pete seemed to be involved, even implicated, in a possible murder, he had a powerful friend to help him—Nero Wolfe, the famous orchid fancier and fancy orchestrator (of clues and suspects).

It has been said, supposedly by Madame de Sévigné, that no man is a hero to his valet. But in this instance Nero was a hero to his bootblack. In fact, Nero Wolfe was "the greatest man in the world" to Pete Vassos . . .

Detective: NERO WOLFE

That Monday morning Pete didn't give me his usual polite grin, contrasting the white gleam of his teeth with the maple-syrup shade of the skin of his square leathery face. He did give me his usual greeting, "Hi-ho, Mr. Goodwin," but with no grin in his voice either, and he ignored the established fact that I expected to take his cap and jacket and put them on the rack. By the time I turned from shutting the door he had dropped his jacket on the hall bench and was picking up his box, which he had put on the floor to free his hands for the jacket.

"You're an hour early," I said. "They going barefoot?"

"Naw, they're busy," he said, and headed down the hall to the office. I followed, snubbed; after all, we had been friends for more than three years.

Pete came three days a week—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—around noon, after he had finished his rounds in an office building on Eighth Avenue. Wolfe always gave him a dollar, since it was a five-minute walk for him to the old brownstone on West 35th Street, and I only gave him a quarter, but he gave my shoes as good a shine as he did Wolfe's. None better.

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I never pretended to keep busy while he was working on Wolfe because I liked to listen. It was instructive. Wolfe's line was that a man who had been born in Greece, even though he had left at the age of six, should be familiar with the ancient glories of his native land, and he had been hammering away at Pete for forty months.

That morning, as Wolfe swiveled his oversized chair, in which he was seated behind his desk, and Pete knelt and got his box in place, and I crossed to my desk, Wolfe demanded, "Who was Eratosthenes and who accused him of murder in a great and famous speech in four-oh-three B.C.?"

Pete, poising his brush, shook his head.

"Who?" Wolfe demanded.

"Maybe Pericles."

"Nonsense. Pericles had been dead twenty-six years. Confound it, I read parts of that speech to you last year. His name begins with L."

"Lycurgus."

"No! The Athenian Lycurgus hadn't been born!"

Pete looked up. "Today you must excuse me." He tapped his head with the edge of the brush. "Empty today. Why I came early, something happened. I go in a man's room, Mr. Ashby, a good customer, two bits every day. Room empty, nobody there. Window wide open, cold wind coming in. Tenth floor. I go and look out window, big crowd down below and cops. I go out to hall and take elevator down, I push through crowd, and there is my good customer, Mr. Ashby, there on the sidewalk, all smashed up terrible.

"I push back out of crowd, I look up, I see heads sticking out of windows, I think it's no good coming up to customers now, they will be looking out of windows, so I come here, that's why I come early, so today you must excuse me, Mr. Wolfe." He started the brush going.

Wolfe grunted. "I advise you to return to that building without delay. Does anyone know you were in his room?"

"Sure. Miss Cox."

"She saw you enter?"

"Sure."

"How long were you in his room?"

"Maybe one minute."

"Did Miss Cox see you leave?"

"No, I got out another door to the hall."

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"Did you push him out the window?"

Pete stopped brushing to raise his head. "Now, Mr. Wolfe. In God's name."

"I advise you to return. If a crowd had already gathered when you looked out the window, and if Miss Cox can fix the exact time you entered the room, you are probably not vulnerable, but you may be in a pickle. You should not have left the premises. The police will soon be looking for you. Go back at once. Mr. Goodwin's shoes can wait till Wednesday—or come this afternoon."

Pete put the brush down and got out the polish. "Cops," he said. "They're all right, I like cops. But if I tell a cop I saw someone—" He started dabbing polish on. "No," he said. "No, sir."

Wolfe grunted. "So you saw someone."

"I didn't say I saw someone, I only said what if I told a cop I did? Did they have cops in Athens in four-oh-three B.C.?" He dabbed polish.

That took the conversation back to the ancient glories of Greece, but I didn't listen. While Pete finished with Wolfe and then shined me, ignoring Wolfe's advice, I practised on him. The idea that a detective should stick strictly to facts is the bunk. One good opinion can sometimes get you further than a hundred assorted facts. So I practised on Pete Vassos for that ten minutes.

Had he killed a man half an hour ago? If the facts, now being gathered by cops, made it possible but left it open, how would I vote? I ended by not voting because I would have had to know about motive. For money, no, Pete wouldn't. For vengeance, that would depend on what for. For fear, sure, if the fear was hot enough. So I couldn't vote.

An hour later, when I walked crosstown on an errand to the bank, I stopped at the corner at Eighth Avenue for a look. The smashed-up Mr. Ashby had been removed, but the sidewalk in front of the building was roped off to keep the crowd of volunteer criminologists from interfering with the research of a couple of homicide scientists, and three cops were dealing with the traffic. Looking up, I saw a few heads sticking out of windows, but none on the tenth floor, which was third from the top.

The afternoon *Gazette* is delivered a little after five o'clock at the old brownstone on West 35th Street which is owned and lived in and worked in—when he works—by Nero Wolfe, and when we have no important operation going it's a dead hour in the office. Wolfe is up on the roof with Theodore for his four-to-six afternoon

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session with the orchids, Fritz is in the kitchen getting something ready for the oven or the pot, and I am killing time.

So when the *Gazette* came that day it was welcomed, and I learned all it knew about the death of Mr. Dennis Ashby. He had hit the sidewalk at 10:35 A.M. and had died on arrival. No one had been found who had seen him come out of the window of his office on the tenth floor, but it was assumed that that was where he had come from, since the receptionist, Miss Frances Cox, had spoken with him on the phone at 10:28, and no other nearby window had been open.

If the police had decided whether to call it accident or suicide or murder they weren't saying. If anyone had been with Ashby in the room when he left by the window, he wasn't bragging about it. No one had gone to the room after 10:35, when Ashby had hit the sidewalk, for some fifteen minutes, when a bootblack named Peter Vassos had entered, expecting to give Ashby a shine.

A few minutes later, when a cop who had got Ashby's name from papers in his pocket had arrived on the tenth floor, Vassos had departed. Found subsequently at his home on Graham Street on the Lower East Side, Manhattan, he had been taken to the District Attorney's office for questioning.

Dennis Ashby, 39, married, no children, had been vice-president of Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., in charge of sales and promotion. According to his business associates and his widow, he had been in good health and his affairs had been in order, and he had had no reason to kill himself. The widow, Joan, was grief-stricken and wouldn't see reporters.

Ashby had been below average in stature, 5 feet 7, 140 pounds. That bit, saved for the last, was a typical *Gazette* touch, suggesting that it would be no great feat to shove a man that size through a window, so it had probably been murder, and buy the *Gazette* tomorrow to find out.

At six o'clock the sound came from the hall of the elevator groaning its way down and jolting to a stop, and Wolfe entered. I waited until he had crossed to his desk and got his seventh of a ton lowered into the oversized chair to say, "They've got Pete down at the D.A.'s office. Apparently he didn't go back to the building at all, and they—"

The doorbell rang. I got up and stepped to the hall, switched on the stoop light, saw a familiar brawny figure through the one-way glass, and turned. "Cramer."

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"What does he want?" Wolfe growled. That meant let him in. When Inspector Cramer of Homicide South is not to be admitted, with or without reason, Wolfe merely snaps, "No!" When he is to be admitted but is first to be riled, again with or without reason, Wolfe says, "I'm busy."

As for Cramer, he has moods too. When I open the door he may cross the sill and march down the hall without a grunt of greeting, or he may hello me man to man. Twice he has even called me Archie, but those were slips of the tongue. That day he let me take his hat and coat, and when I got to the office he was in the red leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk, but not settled back.

That chair has a deep seat, and Cramer likes to plant his feet flat on the floor. I have never seen him cross his legs. He told Wolfe this wouldn't take long, he just wanted a little information to fill in, and Wolfe grunted.

"About that man that came this morning to shine your shoes," Cramer said. "Peter Vassos. What time did he get here?"

Wolfe shook his head. "You should know better, Mr. Cramer. You do know better. I answer questions only when you have established their relevance to your duty and to my obligation, and then at my discretion."

"Yeah." Cramer squeezed his lips together and counted three. "Yeah. Never make it simple, no matter how simple it is, that's you. I'm investigating what may have been a murder, and Peter Vassos may have done it. If he did, he came straight to you afterwards. I know he's been coming more than three years, three times a week, to shine your shoes, but today he came early. I want to know what he said. I don't have to remind you that you're a licensed private detective, you're not a lawyer, and communications to you are not privileged. What time did Vassos come this morning and what did he say?"

Wolfe's brows were up. "Not established. 'May have' isn't enough. A man can get through a window unaided."

"This one didn't. Close to certain. There was a thing on his desk, a big hunk of polished petrified wood, and it had been wiped. A thing like that on a man's desk would have somebody's prints or at least smudges, and it didn't. It had been wiped. And at the back of his head, at the base of his skull, something smooth and round had hit him hard. Nothing he hit when he landed could have done that, and nothing on the way down. This hasn't been

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released yet, but it will be in the morning."

Wolfe made a face. "Then your second 'may have.' Supposing that someone hit him with that thing and then pushed him out the window, it couldn't have been Mr. Vassos, by his account. A woman, a Miss Cox, saw him enter Mr. Ashby's room; and within seconds after entering, finding no one there, he looked out the window and saw a crowd gathered below. If Miss Cox can set the time within—"

"She can. She does. But Vassos might have been in there before that. He could have entered by the other door, direct from the outer hall. That door was kept locked, but he could have knocked and Ashby let him in. He hit Ashby with that thing, killed him or stunned him, dragged or carried him to the window and pushed him out, left by that door, went down the hall and entered the anteroom and spoke to Miss Cox, went to Mercer's room and gave him a shine, went to Busch's room and gave *him* a shine, went to Ashby's room by the inner hall, speaking to Miss Cox again, looked out of the window or didn't, left by the door to the outer hall he had used before, took the elevator down and left the building, decided he had better come and see you, and came. What did he say?"

Wolfe took a deep breath. "Very well. I won't pretend that I'm not concerned. Aside from the many pleasant conversations I have had with Mr. Vassos, he is an excellent bootblack and he never fails to come. He would be hard to replace. Therefore I'll indulge you. Archie. Report to Mr. Cramer in full. Verbatim."

I did so. That was easy, compared to some of the lengthy and complicated dialogues I have had to report to Wolfe over the years. I got my notebook and pen and shorthanded it down as I recited it, so there would be no discrepancy if he wanted it typed and signed later.

Since I was looking at the notebook I couldn't see Cramer's face, but of course his sharp gray eyes were fastened on me, trying to spot a sign of a skip or stumble. When I came to the end, Pete's departure, and tossed the notebook on my desk, he looked at Wolfe.

"You advised him to go back there at once?"

"Yes. Mr. Goodwin's memory is incomparable."

"I know it is. He's good at forgetting too. Vassos didn't go back. He went home and we found him there. His account of his conversation with you agrees with Goodwin's, only he left something out

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or Goodwin put something in. Vassos says nothing about telling you he saw someone."

"He didn't. You heard it. It was an if—what if he told a cop he saw someone."

"Yeah. Like for instance, if he told a cop he saw someone going into Ashby's room by the hall door, would that be a good idea, or not? Like that?"

"Pfui. You're welcome to your conjectures, but don't expect me to rate them. I'm concerned; I have said so; it would be a serious inconvenience to lose Mr. Vassos. If he killed that man a jury would wonder why. So would I."

"We're not ready for a jury." Cramer stood up. "But we've got a pretty good guess at why. Granting that Goodwin has reported everything Vassos said today, which I don't, what about other days? What has Vassos ever said about Ashby?"

"Nothing."

"Never mentioned his name?"

"No. Archie?"

"Right," I said. "Not before today."

"What has he ever said about his daughter?"

"Nothing," Wolfe said.

"Correction," I said. "What Pete talked about wasn't up to him. Mr. Wolfe kept him on the ancient glories of Greece. But one day more than two years ago, in June nineteen fifty-eight, when Mr. Wolfe was upstairs in bed with the flu, Pete told me his daughter had just graduated from high school and showed me a picture of her. Pete and I would know each other a lot better if it wasn't for ancient Greece."

"And he has never mentioned his daughter since?"

"No, how could he?"

"Nuts. Greece." Cramer looked at Wolfe. "You know what I think? I think this. If you know Vassos killed Ashby, and you know why, on account of his daughter, and you can help nail him for it, you won't. If you can help him wriggle out of it, you will."

Cramer tapped Wolfe's desk with a finger. "Just because, by God, you can count on him to come and shine your shoes, and you like to spout to him about people nobody ever heard of. That's you." His eyes darted to me. "And you." He turned and tramped out.

It was exactly 28 hours later, Tuesday evening at half-past ten, that I went to answer the doorbell and saw, through the one-way

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glass of the front door, a scared but determined little face bounded at the sides by the turned-up collar of a brown wool coat and on top by a fuzzy brown thing that flopped to the right. When I opened the door she told me with a single rush of breath, "You're Archie Goodwin I'm Elma Vassos."

It had been a normal nothing-stirring day, three meals, Wolfe reading a book and dictating letters in between his morning and afternoon turns in the plant rooms, Fritz housekeeping and cooking, me choring. It was still in the air whether I would have to find another bootblack. According to the papers the police had tagged Ashby's death as murder, but no one had been charged.

Around one o'clock Sergeant Purley Stebbins had phoned to ask if we knew where Peter Vassos was, and when I said no and started to ask a question he hung up on me. A little after four Lon Cohen of the *Gazette* had phoned to offer a grand for a thousand-word piece on Peter Vassos, a dollar a word, and another grand if I would tell him where Vassos was. I declined with thanks and made a counter offer, my autograph in his album if he would tell me who at Homicide or the D.A.'s bureau had given him the steer that we knew Vassos. When I told him I had no idea where Vassos was he pronounced a word you are not supposed to use on the telephone.

I usually stick to the rule that no one is to be ushered to the office when Wolfe is there without asking him, but I ignore it now and then in an emergency. That time the emergency was a face. I had been in the kitchen chinning with Fritz. Wolfe was buried in a book, and to him no woman is ever welcome in that house. Ten to one he would have refused to see her.

But I had seen her scared little face and he hadn't, and anyway he hadn't done a lick of work for more than two weeks, and it would be up to me, not him, to find another bootblack if it came to that. So I invited her in, took her coat and put it on a hanger, escorted her to the office, and said, "Miss Elma Vassos. Pete's daughter."

Wolfe closed his book on a finger and glared at me. She put a hand on the back of the red leather chair to steady herself. It looked as if she might crack, and I took her arm and eased her into the chair. Wolfe transferred the glare to her, and there was her face. It was a little face, but not too little, and the point was that you didn't see any of the details, eyes or mouth or nose, just the face. I have supplied descriptions of many faces professionally,

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but with her I wouldn't know where to begin. I asked her if she wanted a drink, water or something stronger, and she said no.

She looked at Wolfe and said, "You're Nero Wolfe. Do you know my father is dead?" She needed more breath.

Wolfe shook his head. His lips parted and closed again. He turned to me. "Confound it, get something! Brandy. Whiskey."

"I couldn't swallow it," she said. "You didn't know?"

"No." He was gruff. "When? How? Can you talk?"

"I guess so." She wasn't any too sure. "I have to. Some boys found him at the bottom of a cliff. I went and looked at him—not there, at the morgue." She set her teeth on her lip, hard, but it didn't change the face. She made the teeth let go. "They think he killed himself, he jumped off, but he didn't. I know he didn't."

Wolfe pushed his chair back. "I offer my profound sympathy, Miss Vassos. I'll leave you with Mr. Goodwin. You will give him the details." He moved, the book in his hand.

That was him. He thought she was going to flop, and a woman off the rail is not only unwelcome, she is not to be borne. Not by him. But she caught his sleeve and stopped him. "You," she said. "I must tell you. To my father you are a great man, the greatest man in the world. I must tell *you*."

"She'll do," I said. "She'll make it."

There are few men who would not like to be told they are the greatest in the world, and Wolfe isn't one of them. He stared down at her for five seconds, returned to his chair, sat, inserted the marker in the book and put it down, scowled at her, and demanded, "When did you eat?"

"I haven't—I can't swallow."

"Pfui. When did you eat?"

"A little this morning. My father hadn't come home and—"

He swiveled to push a button, leaned back, closed his eyes, and opened them when he heard a step at the door. "Tea with honey, Fritz. Toast, pot cheese, and Bar-le-Duc. For Miss Vassos."

Fritz went.

"I really can't," she said.

"You will if you want me to listen. Where is the cliff?"

It took her a second to go back. "It's in the country somewhere. I guess they told me, but I don't—"

"When was he found?"

"Sometime this afternoon, late this afternoon."

"You saw him at the morgue. Where, in the country?"

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"No, they brought him; it's not far from here. When I had—when I could—I came here from there."

"Who was with you?"

"Two men, detectives. They told me their names, but I don't remember."

"I mean *with* you. Brother, sister, mother?"

"I have no brother or sister. My mother died ten years ago."

"When did you last see your father alive?"

"Yesterday. When I got home from work he wasn't there, and it was nearly six o'clock when he came, and he said he had been at the District Attorney's office for three hours, they had been asking him questions about Mr. Ashby. You know about Mr. Ashby, he said he told you about him when he came here. Of course I already knew about him because I work there. I *did* work there."

"Where?"

"At the office. That company. Mercer's Bobbins."

"Indeed. In what capacity?"

"I'm a stenographer. Not anybody's secretary, just a stenographer. Mostly typing and sometimes letters for Mr. Busch. My father got me the job through Mr. Mercer."

"How long ago?"

"Two years ago. After I graduated from high school."

"Then you knew Mr. Ashby."

"Yes. I knew him a little, yes."

"About last evening. Your father came home around six. Then?"

"I had dinner nearly ready, and we talked, and we ate, and then we talked some more. He said there was something he hadn't told the police and he hadn't told you, and he was going to go and tell you in the morning and ask you what he ought to do. He said you were such a great man that people paid you fifty thousand dollars just to tell them what to do, and he thought you would tell him for nothing, so it would be foolish not to go and ask you.

"He wouldn't tell me what it was. Then a friend of mine came—I was going to a movie with her—and we went. When I got home father wasn't there and there was a note on the table. It said he was going out and might be late. One of the detectives tried to take the note but I wouldn't let him. I have it here in my bag if you want to see it."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not necessary. Had your father mentioned before you left that he intended to go out?"

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"No. And he always did. We always told each other ahead of time what we were going to do."

"Had he given you no hint—? Very well, Fritz."

Fritz crossed to the red leather chair, put the tray on the little table that is always there for people to write checks on, and proffered her a napkin. She didn't lift a hand to take it. Wolfe spoke.

"I'll listen to more, Miss Vassos, only after you eat."

He picked up his book, opened to his page, and swiveled to put his back to her. She took the napkin. Fritz went. I could have turned to my desk and pretended to do something, but I would have been reflected to her in the big mirror on the wall back of my desk, which gives me a view of the door to the hall, and she would have been reflected to me; so I got up and went to the kitchen.

Fritz was at the side table putting the cover on the toaster. As I got the milk from the refrigerator I told him, "She's the daughter of Pete Vassos. I'll have to scare up a bootblack. He's dead."

"Him?" Fritz turned. "*Dieu m'en garde.*" He shook his head. "Too young. Then she is not a client?"

"Not one to send a bill to." I poured milk. "Anyhow, as you know, he wouldn't take a paying client if one came up the stoop on his knees. It's December, and his tax bracket is near the top. If she wants him to help and he won't, I'll take a leave of absence and handle it myself. You saw her face."

He snorted. "She should be warned. About you."

"Sure. I'll do that first."

I don't gulp milk. When the glass was half empty I tiptoed out to the office door. Wolfe's back was still turned and Elma was putting jam on a piece of toast. I finished the milk, taking my time, and took the glass to the kitchen, and when I returned Wolfe had about-faced and put the book down and she was saying something. I entered and crossed to my desk.

" . . . and he had never done that before," she was telling Wolfe. "I thought he might have gone back to the District Attorney's office, so I phoned there, but he hadn't. I phoned two of his friends but they hadn't seen him. I went to work as usual, he goes to that building every morning, and I told Mr. Busch and he tried to find out if he was in the building, but no one had seen him.

"Then a detective came and asked me a lot of questions, and later, after lunch, another one came and took me to the District Attorney's office, and I—"

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"Miss Vassos." Wolfe was curt. "If you please. You have eaten, though not much, and your faculties are apparently in order. You said you must tell *me,* and I would not be uncivil to your father's daughter, but these details are not essential. Give me brief answers to some questions. You said that they think your father killed himself, he jumped off. Who are 'they'?"

"The police. The detectives."

"How do you know they do?"

"The way they talked. What they said. What they asked me. They think he killed Mr. Ashby and he knew they were finding out about it, so he killed himself."

"Do they think they know why he killed Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes. Because he found out that Mr. Ashby had seduced me."

I lifted a brow. You couldn't be much briefer than that. There wasn't the slightest sign on her face that she had said anything remarkable. Nor was there any sign on Wolfe's face that he had heard anything remarkable. He asked, "How do you know that?"

"What they said this afternoon at the District Attorney's office. They used that word, 'seduced.' "

"Did you know that your father had found out that Mr. Ashby had seduced you?"

"Of course not, because he hadn't. My father wouldn't have believed that even if Mr. Ashby had told him, or even if I had gone crazy and told him, because he would have known it wasn't so. My father knew me."

Wolfe was frowning. "You mean he *thought* he knew you?"

"He *did* know me. He didn't know I couldn't be seduced—I suppose any girl *could* be seduced if her head gets turned enough—but he knew if I was I would tell him. And he knew if I ever was seduced it wouldn't be Mr. Ashby or anyone like him. My father knew me."

"Let's make it clear. Are you saying that Mr. Ashby had not seduced you?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Had he tried to?"

She hesitated. "No." She considered. "He took me to dinner and a show three times. The last time was nearly a year ago. He asked me several times since, but I didn't go because I had found out what he was like and I didn't like him."

Wolfe's frown had gone. "Then why do the police think he had seduced you?"

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"I don't know, but someone must have told them lies about Mr. Ashby and me, from what they said."

"Who? Did they name anyone?"

"No."

"Do you know who? Or can you guess?"

"No."

Wolfe's eyes came to me. "Archie?"

That was to be expected. It was merely routine. He pretends to presume that he knows nothing, and I know everything, about women, and he was asking me to tell him whether Elma Vassos had or had not been seduced by Dennis Ashby, yes or no. What the hell, I wasn't under oath, and I did have an opinion. "They don't go by dreams," I said. "She's probably right, someone has fed them a line. Say thirty to one."

"You believe her."

"Believe? Make it twenty to one."

She turned her head, slowly, to look straight at me. "Thank you, Mr. Goodwin," she said and turned back to Wolfe.

His eyes narrowed at her. "Well. Assuming you have been candid, what then? You said you must tell *me,* and I have listened. Your father is dead. I esteemed him, and I would spare no pains to resurrect him if that were possible. But what can you expect me to tender beyond my sympathy, which you have?"

"Why . . ." She was surprised. "I thought—isn't it obvious, what they're going to do? I mean that they're not going to do anything? If they think my father killed Mr. Ashby on account of me and then killed himself, what *can* they do? That will end it, it's already ended for them. So I'll have to do something, and I don't know what, so I had to come to you because my father said—"

She stopped and covered her mouth with her spread fingers. It was the first quick strong movement she had made. "Oh!" she said through the fingers. Her hand dropped. "Of course. You must forgive me."

She opened her bag, a big brown leather one, stuck her hand in, and took something out. "I should have done this before. My father never spent any of the money you paid him. This is it, all dollar bills, the bills you gave him. He said he would do something special with it some day, but he never said what. But he said—" She stopped. She clamped her teeth on her lip.

"Don't do that," Wolfe snapped.

She nodded. "I know, I won't. I haven't counted it, but it must

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be nearly five hundred dollars; you paid him three times a week for over three years." She got up and put it on Wolfe's desk and returned to the chair. "Of course it's nothing to you, it's nothing like fifty thousand, so I'm really asking for charity; but it's for my father, not for me, and after all it will mean that you got your shoes shined for nothing for more than three years."

Wolfe looked at me. I had let her in, I admit that, but from his look you might have thought I had killed Ashby *and* Pete and had seduced her into the bargain. I cocked my head at him. He looked at her. "Miss Vassos. You are asking me to establish your father's innocence and your chastity. Is that it?"

"My chastity doesn't matter. I mean that's not it."

"But your father's innocence is."

"Yes. *Yes*!"

Wolfe wiggled a finger at the stack of dollar bills, held by rubber bands. "Your money. Take it. It is, as you say, nothing for a job like this, and if I am quixotic enough to undertake it I don't want a tip. I make no commitment. If I said yes or no now it would be no; it's midnight, bedtime, and I'm tired. I'll tell you in the morning. You will sleep here. There's a spare bedroom, adequate and comfortable." He pushed his chair back and rose.

"But I have no things—"

"You have your skin." He frowned down at her. "Suppose this. Suppose the assumptions of the police are correct: that Mr. Ashby had in fact seduced you, that your father learned about it and killed him, and that, fearing exposure, he then killed himself; and suppose that under that burden of knowledge you go home to face the night alone. What would you do?"

"But it's not true! He didn't!"

"I told you to suppose. Suppose it were true. What would you do?"

"Why . . . I would kill myself. Of course."

Wolfe nodded. "I assume you would. And if you die tonight or tomorrow in circumstances which make it plausible that you committed suicide, others, including the police, will make that assumption. The murderer knows that, and since his attempt to have Ashby's death taken for suicide might have succeeded, and his attempt to have your father's death taken for suicide apparently *has* succeeded, he will probably try again.

"If he knows you he knows that you are not without spirit, as you have shown by coming here, and you will be a mortal threat

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to him as long as you live. You will sleep here. I shall not be available before eleven in the morning, but Mr. Goodwin will, and you will tell him everything you know that may be useful.

"If I decide to help you, as a service to your father, I'll need all the information I can get. Don't try withholding anything from Mr. Goodwin; his understanding of attractive young women is extremely acute. Good night." He turned to me. "You'll see that the South Room is in order. Good night." He went.

As the sound came of the elevator door closing, the client told me, "Take the money, Mr. Goodwin. I don't want—" She started to shake and her hands came up to cover her face. It was a good thing she had fought it off until the great man had left.

At 10:45 Wednesday morning I was at my desk, typing. When I had knocked on the door of the South Room, which is on the third floor, directly above Wolfe's room, at 7:45, Elma had been up and dressed. She said she had slept pretty well, but she didn't look it. I eat breakfast in the kitchen, but Fritz wouldn't want her to, so he served us in the dining room, and she did all right—all her orange juice, two griddle cakes, two slices of bacon, two shirred eggs with chives, and two cups of coffee. Then to the office, and for nearly an hour, from 8:40 to 9:30, I had asked questions and she had answered them.

Since she had started to work for Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., two years back, their office space had doubled and their office staff had tripled. That is, their sales and executive office in the Eighth Avenue building; she didn't know what the increase had been in the factory in New Jersey, but it had been big. It was understood by everybody that the increase had been due to the ability and effort of one man, Dennis Ashby, who had been put in charge of sales and promotion three years ago. He had boosted more than bobbins; the firm now made more than twenty items used in the garment industry.

Of the dozen members of the staff she named and described, here are some samples:

JOHN MERCER, president. There had been an office party, with cake and punch, on his sixty-first birthday in September. He had inherited the business from his father; it was generally understood that he owned most of the stock of the corporation. He spent most of his time at the factory and was at the New York office only two days a week.

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The firm had been about to go under when he had made Ashby vice-president and put him in charge of sales and promotion. He called the employees by their first names, and they all liked him. They called him, not to his face, the Big M. He had children and grandchildren, Elma didn't know how many. None of them was active in the business.

ANDREW BUSCH, secretary of the corporation and office manager, was in his early thirties, not married. Up to a year ago he had been merely the head bookkeeper, and when the office manager had died of old age Mercer had promoted him. He had a room of his own, but three or four times a day he would appear in the rumpus and make the rounds of the desks. (The rumpus was the big room where 28 girls did the work. One of them had called it the rumpus room and it had been shortened to rumpus.) He had instructed the stenographers that when Ashby sent for one of them she was to stop at his room and tell him where she was going, so they called him, not to his face, Paladin.

PHILIP HORAN, salesman, in his middle thirties, married, two or three children. I include him because (a) he was seldom at the office before four in the afternoon but had been seen there Monday morning by one of the girls, (b) he had expected to get the job Mercer had given Ashby and was known to be sore about it, and (c) he had asked one of the girls, an old-timer who had been with the firm as long as he had, to find out what had happened and was happening between Ashby and Elma Vassos, and had kept after her about it.

FRANCES COX, receptionist. Elma said she was 30, so she was probably 27 or 28. I do know a few things about women. I include her because if she had seen Pete entering Ashby's room she might have seen someone else on the move, and that might be useful.

DENNIS ASHBY, dead. He had told Elma a year back that he was 38. Had started with Mercer's Bobbins long ago, Elma didn't know how long, as a stock clerk. Small and not handsome. When I asked Elma to name the animal he was most like, she said a monkey. He had spent about half of his time out of the office, out promoting.

He had had no secretary; when he had wanted a stenographer he had called one in from the rumpus, and he had handled his appointments himself, with the assistance of Frances Cox, the receptionist. He had kept a battery of files in his own room. The girls had called him the Menace, naturally, with his name Den-

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nis, but also because they meant it. Elma had no knowledge of any seduction he had actually achieved, but there had been much talk.

JOAN ASHBY, the widow. I include her because the widow of a murdered man must always be included. She had once worked at Mercer's Bobbins, but had quit when she married Ashby, before Elma had got her job there. Elma had never seen her and knew next to nothing about her. Ashby had told Elma across a restaurant table that his marriage had been a mistake and he was trying to get his wife to agree to a divorce.

ELMA VASSOS. One point: when I asked her why she had gone to dinners and shows with a married man she said, "I told my father he had asked me, and he told me to go. He said every girl is so curious about married men she wants to be with one somewhere, and she does, and I might as well go ahead and have it over with. Of course, my father knew me."

As for Monday morning, Elma had been in Busch's room from 9:40 to 10:15, taking dictation from him, and then in the rumpus with the crew. About half-past eleven John Mercer had entered with a man, a stranger, and called them together, and the man had asked if any of them had been in Ashby's room that morning, or had seen anyone entering or leaving it, and had got a unanimous no; and then Mercer had told them what had happened.

Even with my extremely acute understanding of attractive young women, I didn't suspect that she was holding out on me, except maybe on one detail, near the end, when I asked who she thought had lied to the cops about her and Ashby. She wouldn't name anyone even as a wild guess. I told her that was ridiculous, that any man or woman alive, knowing that someone or ones of a group had smeared him, would darned well have a notion who it was, but nothing doing. If any of them had it in for her she didn't know it, except Ashby, and he was dead.

At 10:45 I was at my desk typing that part, nearly finished, when the house phone buzzed and I turned and got it. Wolfe rarely interrupts himself in the plant rooms to buzz me. Since he eats breakfast in his room and goes straight up to the roof, I hadn't seen him, so I said good morning.

"Good morning. What are you doing?"

"Typing my conference with Miss Vassos. The substance. Not verbatim. About done."

"Well?"

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"Nothing startling. Some facts that might help. As for believing her, it's now fifty to one."

He grunted. "Or better. What could conceivably have led her to come to me with her story if it weren't true? Confound it. Where is she?"

"In her room. Of course she isn't going to work."

"Has she eaten? A guest, welcome or not, must not starve."

"She won't. She ate. She phoned the D.A.'s office to ask when she can have the body."

"The account in *The Times* supports her conclusion that the police assume that her father killed Ashby and committed suicide—not, of course, explicitly. You have read it?"

"Yes. So has she."

"But *The Times* may be wrong, and certainly she may be. It's possible that Mr. Cramer is finessing, and if so we can leave it to him. You'll have to find out. Conclusively."

"Lon Cohen may know."

"That won't do. You'll have to see Mr. Cramer. Now."

"If he's finessing he won't show *me* his hand."

"Certainly not. It will take dexterity. Your intelligence, guided by experience."

"Yeah. That's me. I'll go as soon as I finish typing this—five minutes. You'll find it in your drawer." I hung up, beating him to it.

It took only three minutes. I put the original in his desk drawer and the carbon in mine, went to the kitchen to tell Fritz I was leaving, got my coat from the hall rack, and departed. It's a good distance for a leg-stretcher from the old brownstone to Homicide South, but my brain likes to take it easy while I'm walking and I had to consult it about approaches, so I went to Ninth Avenue and flagged a taxi.

The dick at the desk, who was not my favorite city employee, said Cramer was busy but Lieutenant Rowcliff might spare me a minute, and I said no thank you and sat down to wait. It was close to noon when I was escorted down the hall to Cramer's room and found him standing at the end of his desk. As I entered he rasped, "So your client bought a one-way ticket. Want to see him?"

It seldom pays to prepare an approach. It depends on the approachee. The frame of mind he was in, it was hopeless to try smoothing him, so I switched. "Nuts," I said offensively. "If you

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mean Vassos, he wasn't a client, he was just a bootblack. You owe Mr. Wolfe something and he wants it. Elma Vassos, the daughter, slept in his house last night."

"The hell she did. In your room?"

"No. She came and fed him a line that her life was in danger. Whoever killed Ashby and her father, she didn't know who, was going to kill her. Then the morning paper has it different. Not spelled out, but it's there, that Vassos killed Ashby and when you started breathing down his neck he found a cliff and jumped.

"So you knew about it when you came to see Mr. Wolfe Monday, you knew then about Ashby and Elma Vassos. Why didn't you say so? If you had, when she came last night she wouldn't have got in. So you owe him something. When he turns her out he wants to make a little speech to her, and he wants to know who gave you the dope on her and Ashby. Off the record, and you won't be quoted."

He threw his head back and laughed. Not an all-out laugh, just a ha-ha. He stretched an arm to touch my chest with a forefinger. "Slept in his house, huh? Wonderful! I'd like to hear his speech, what will he call her? Not trollop or floozy, he'll have some fancy word for it. And he has the nerve—on out, Goodwin."

"He wants to know—"

"Nuts. Beat it."

"But dammit—"

"Out."

I went; and since there was now nothing to work the brain on, I walked back to 35th Street. Wolfe was at his desk with the book he was on, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich,* by Shirer. A tray on his desk held a beer bottle and a glass, and beside it was the report I had typed of my talk with Elma. I went to my desk and sat, and waited until he finished a paragraph and looked up.

"We'll have to bounce her," I said. "You will. I would prefer to marry her and reform her, but Cramer would take my license away. Do you want it in full?"

He said yes, and I gave it to him. At the end I said, "As you see, it didn't take any dexterity. The first thing he said, 'So your client bought a one-way ticket,' was enough. He is not finessing. You can't blame him for laughing, since he honestly believes that you have a floozy for a house guest. As for his refusing to name—"

"Shut up."

I leaned back and crossed my legs. He glowered at me for five

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seconds, then closed his eyes. In a moment he opened them. "It's hopeless," he said through his teeth.

"Yes, sir," I agreed. "I suppose I could disguise myself as a bootblack and take Pete's box and try to—"

"Shut up! I mean it's intolerable. Mr. Cramer cannot be permitted to flout . . ." He put the book down without marking his place, which he never did. "There's no way out. I could have shined my shoes myself. I considered this possibility after reading your report, and here it is. Get Mr. Parker."

I didn't have to look at the book for the number of Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer. I turned to the phone and dialed it, and got him, and Wolfe lifted his receiver.

"Good morning, sir. Afternoon. I need you. I am going to advise a young woman who has consulted me to bring actions against a corporation and five or six individuals, asking for damages, say a million dollars for each of them, on account of defamatory statements they have made. Slander, not libel, since as far as I know the statements have been made orally and not published. She is here in my house. Can you come to my office? . . . No, after lunch do. Three o'clock? . . . Very well, I'll expect you."

He hung up and turned to me. "We'll have to keep her. You will go with her to her home to get whatever she needs—not now, later. Mr. Cramer expects me to turn her out, does he? Pfui. She would be dead within twenty-four hours. Tell Fritz to take her lunch to her room. I will not be rude to a guest at my table, and the effort to control myself would spoil the meal."

I asked Parker once how many law books he had in his office, and he said about 700. I asked how many there were in print in the English language, and he said probably around 10,000. So I suppose you can't expect to give a lawyer an order for a lawsuit the way you give a tailor an order for a suit of clothes. But they sure do make a job of it.

Parker came on the dot at three, and they barely got it settled in time for Wolfe to keep his afternoon date with the orchids. At three minutes to four Wolfe got to his feet and said, "Then tomorrow as early as may be. You'll proceed as soon as Archie phones you that he has explained the matter to Miss Vassos."

Parker shook his head. "The way you operate. You actually haven't mentioned it to her?"

"It would have been pointless until I learned if it was feasible."

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Wolfe went to the hall to take the elevator to the roof, Parker went along, and I went to hold his coat and let him out. Then I mounted two flights to the South Room and knocked on the door, heard a faint "Come in," and did so. Elma was sitting on the edge of the bed running her fingers through her hair. "I guess I fell asleep," she said. "What time is it?"

I would have been willing to help her with the hair. Any man would; it was nice hair. "Four o'clock," I said. "Fritz says you ate only two of his Creole fritters. You don't care for shrimps?"

"I'm sorry. He doesn't like me, and I don't blame him. I'm a nuisance." She sighed, deep.

"That's not it. He suspects any woman who enters the house of wanting to take it over." I pulled a chair around and sat. "There have been developments. I went to see a cop, an Inspector named Cramer, and you're right. They think your father killed Ashby and then himself. You are now Mr. Wolfe's client. That stack of bills in the safe is still your property, but I have taken a dollar from it as a retainer. Do you approve?"

"Of course—but take all of it. I know it's nothing—"

"Skip it. That's no inducement for him. And don't thank him. He would rather miss a meal than have anyone think he's a softy, that he would wiggle a finger to help anyone. Don't even hint at it. The idea is that Cramer has flouted him, his word, and therefore he will make a monkey of Cramer, and I admit that that may be the main point. So he has to prove that your father didn't kill Ashby, and the only way he can do that is to find out who did.

"The question is how. He would have to send me to that building to go over the setup and see people, and to invite some of them to come to his office, since he never leaves the house on business, but he can't expect the impossible even of me. They would toss me out, and they wouldn't come. So he must—"

"Some of the girls might come. And Mr. Busch might."

"Not enough. We need the ones who wouldn't. So he must drop a bomb. You are going to sue six people for damages, a million dollars each. Slander. He was going to have you sue the corporation too, but the lawyer vetoed it. The lawyer is preparing the papers and will go ahead as soon as you phone him to. His name is Nathaniel Parker and he's good.

"It isn't expected that any of the cases will ever get to a court or that you will collect anything, that's not the idea. The idea is that the fur will begin to fly. Do you want to consult anybody be-

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fore you tell Parker to go ahead? Do you know a lawyer?"

"No." Her fingers were clasped tight. "Of course I'll do anything Mr. Wolfe says. Who are the six people?"

"One, John Mercer. Two, Andrew Busch. Three, Philip Horan. Four, Frances Cox. Five, Mrs. Ashby. Six, Inspector Cramer. Anything Cramer says in his official capacity is privileged, but there's a point of law. He may have said something to a reporter, and he told me you're a floozy, or implied it. At least it will be a threat to get him on the witness stand under oath and ask him who told him what about you and Ashby, and just having him summoned will be a pleasure for Mr. Wolfe and you might as well humor him. You're not listening."

"Yes, I am. I don't think I—Can't you leave Mr. Busch out?"

"Why should we?"

"Because I don't think he said anything like that about me. I'm sure he wouldn't."

"Neither did some of the others, probably. It's even conceivable that none of those five did. This is only to get in there, to get at them."

She nodded. "I know, I understand that, but I wouldn't want Mr. Busch to think that I think he might slander me. If what you want—if Mr. Wolfe wants to talk to him, I'm pretty sure he would come if I asked him."

I eyed her. "There seems to be an angle you didn't mention this morning. When you told me about Busch you didn't say he would come if you whistled."

"I'm not saying it now!" She was indignant. "All I'm saying, he's a nice man, and he's decent, and he wouldn't do that!"

"Have you seen much of him out of the office?"

"No. After Mr. Ashby, I decided I wouldn't make any dates with any man in the office, married or not."

"Okay, we'll exclude Busch, with the understanding that you'll produce him if and when we need him." I got up. "We'll go down to the office and phone Parker, and then we'll go and get whatever you want for an indefinite stay. It may be two days and it may be two months. When Mr. Wolfe—"

"Stay here for two months? I can't!"

"You can and will if necessary. If you got killed it would be next to impossible for Mr. Wolfe to get back at Cramer, and that would sour him for good and he would be unbearable. If you want to do things to your face and hair, not that I see anything wrong

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with them, I'll be down in the office." I went.

Waiting to call Parker until she came down, since he would want to hear his client's voice as evidence that she existed, I had a notion to buzz the plant rooms and ask Wolfe if he wanted to see Andrew Busch at six o'clock, but since he would probably have insisted on Busch getting a summons along with the others I decided against it. I'm a softy.

Elma came down much sooner than most girls would have after a nap, and I dialed and got Parker, told him it was all set but that Busch was to be crossed off, and put Elma on. He asked her if he was to proceed on her behalf as he had been instructed by Wolfe, and she said yes, and that was it. I told her I had another call to make, dialed the number of the *Gazette,* got Lon Cohen, and asked him if his offer of a grand for a piece on Pete Vassos was still open. He said he'd have to see the piece first.

"We haven't got time to write it," I said. "We're busy. But if you want something for nothing, Miss Elma Vassos, his daughter, has engaged the services of Nero Wolfe, the famous private detective, and is staying at his house, and is not accessible. On his advice, she has engaged Nathanial Parker, the famous counselor, to bring an action against five people: John Mercer, Philip Horan, Frances Cox, Mrs. Dennis Ashby, and Inspector Cramer of the N.Y.P.D.

"She is asking for a million dollars for damages for slander from each of them. They will be served tomorrow, probably in time for your first edition. I'm giving you this, exclusive, on instructions from Mr. Wolfe. Parker has been told that you'll probably be phoning him for confirmation, and you'll get it. Yours truly. See you in court."

"Wait a minute, hold it! You can't just—"

"Sorry, I'm busy. No use calling back because I won't be here. Print now, pay later."

I hung up and went to the kitchen to tell Fritz we were leaving, and by the time I got to the hall rack Elma had her hat and coat on. Since her place was downtown we went to Eighth Avenue for a taxi. She was all right at walking. Walking with a girl, you can tell pretty well if you'd want to dance with her. Not if she keeps step, she may not have the legs for that, but if she naturally stays with you without doing a barnacle.

Another mark for her, she didn't apologize for the neighborhood she lived in as the cab turned into Graham Street and stopped in

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front of Number 314. At that, it wasn't as bad in the December dark as it would have been in daylight; no street is. Dirt doesn't look so dirty. But I must say the vestibule she led me into would have appreciated some attention, and when she used her key and we entered, the inside was no better.

"Up three flights," she said, went to the stairs, and I followed. I admit I thought she was overdoing it a little. She might at least have said something like, "When I got a job I thought we ought to move, but my father didn't want to," just casually. Not a word.

On the third landing she started down the hall toward the rear, stopped after a couple of steps, and said, "Why, the light's on!"

I was at her elbow. I whispered, "Which door?" She pointed to the right, to where a strip of light showed through the crack at the bottom of a door. I whispered, "Is there a bell?" and she whispered back, "It isn't working."

I went to the door and knocked on it, and after a short wait it opened, and facing me was a man about my height with a broad flat face and a lot of tousled brown hair.

"Good evening," I said.

"Where's Miss Vassos?" he said. "Are you a police—Oh! Thank God!"

Elma was there. "But you—how did you—this is Mr. Busch, Mr. Goodwin."

"I seem to be . . ." He let it hang, apparently undecided how he seemed to be. He looked at me and back at her.

"I'll trade you even," I said. "I'll tell you why I'm here if you'll tell me why you're here. I came to carry a bag of clothes and accessories for Miss Vassos. She is staying at Nero Wolfe's house on Thirty-fifth Street. My name is Archie Goodwin and I work for him. Your turn."

"Nero Wolfe the detective?"

"Right."

He went to her. "You're staying at his house?"

"Yes."

"You were there last night and today?"

"Yes."

"I wish you had let me know. I came here from the office, I just got here. I was here last night. I got the janitor to let me in; he's worried too. I was afraid you might—I'm glad to see—I thought perhaps . . ."

"I guess I should have phoned," she said.

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"Yes, I wish you had; then at least I would have known . . ."

He didn't sound much like Paladin. Or even an office manager. "If you don't mind," I said, "Miss Vassos would like to come in and pack a bag. She has hired Nero Wolfe to find out who killed Dennis Ashby, and she'll stay at his house until he does. Of course, since you think her father killed Ashby, I don't suppose—"

"I don't think her father killed Ashby."

"No? Then why did you tell the police that he had found out that Ashby had seduced her?"

He hauled off and swung at me. He meant well, but was so slow that I could have landed a poke while he was still on his backswing. Elma was quicker, jumping between us. He was going through with it anyhow, looping around her, and he would finally have reached the target if I had moved my head eight inches to the left and waited till he got there; but instead I caught his wrist and jerked it down and gave it a twist. That twist hurts, but he didn't squeak.

Elma, between us, turned to face me, protesting, "I told you he wouldn't!"

"I didn't," he said.

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Okay, you can come along for a talk with Nero Wolfe. You can carry her bag. If there are two, we'll each take one. Go ahead, Miss Vassos, I won't let him hurt me."

She slipped in past him. Busch looked at his wrist and felt at it, and I told him it might swell a little. He turned and went inside, and I followed. It was a medium-sized room, very neat, good enough chairs and nice plain rugs, a TV set in a corner, magazines on a table, shelves with books.

A framed picture on top of the book shelves looked familiar and I crossed over, and darned if it wasn't Wolfe on the cover of *Tick* magazine. That had been more than a year ago. I allowed myself a healthy grin as I thought of how Sergeant Stebbins, or anyone else from Homicide, had felt when he came to have a look at the home of a murderer and found a picture of Nero Wolfe in a place of honor. I would have liked to take it and show it to Wolfe. I had heard him quote what someone said, that no man is a hero to his valet, but apparently he could be to his bootblack.

When Elma came out of an inner room with a suitcase and a small bag, Busch, who had put his overcoat on, went to relieve

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her of the load. I looked at my watch: 5:55. Wolfe would be down from the plant rooms by the time we got there.

"I'll take one," I offered. "Better give the wrist a rest."

"The wrist's all right," he said, trying not to set his jaw.

A hero.

There can be such a thing as too much self-control. I should have resigned that day, for the forty-third time, when Wolfe glared at me and said, "I won't see him." It was inexcusable, being childish in front of a client. Leaving Busch in the front room, I had gone with Elma to the office, explained why I had told Parker to leave Busch out, reported the episode at Graham Street, said that I had checked with the janitor on the way out and he had admitted that he had let Busch into the Vassos apartment, and asked if he wanted Elma present while he talked with Busch; and he said, "I won't see him." Top that.

He knew he was going to have to see a bunch of them and he was paying a lawyer to pull a stunt that would make them come, but that would be tomorrow and this was today and he was reading a book, and I hadn't phoned to warn him. I should have walked out on him, but there was Elma, so I merely said, "He can have my room and I'll sleep here on the couch."

His eyes narrowed at me. He knew I meant it and that I wouldn't back down, and that it was his fault for starting it in front of a witness. If I had just sat and met his gaze it would have had to end either by his firing me or my quitting; so I arose, said I would take Miss Vassos' luggage up to her room, shook my head no at her on my way to the hall, picked up the bag and suitcase, mounted the two flights, put them in the South Room, returned to the landing, and stood and listened.

That simplified it for him. With me there it would have been impossible; with me gone, all he had to do was to get her to say that it might help if he talked to Busch. Which he did. I could hear the voices, though not the words, for three minutes; then nothing; and then voices again, including Busch's. I descended.

Of course I kept my eyes straight ahead as I entered and crossed to my desk, detouring around Busch, who was in one of the yellow chairs that had been drawn up to face Wolfe's desk. Wolfe was talking.

"... and I intend to do so. I'm not obliged to account for the springs of my interest. Call it pique. Mr. Vassos kept my shoes

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presentable and never failed me; it won't be easy to replace him; and whoever deprived me of his services will be made to regret it. Let's consider you, since you're here. Discovered by Mr. Goodwin and Miss Vassos in her apartment, you affected concern for her welfare. Real concern, or assumed?"

Busch was sitting straight and stiff, his palms on his knees. "I don't have to account to you, either," he declared, louder than necessary. "How do I know what you're going to do?"

"You don't. But you will. I won't debate it. Go. You'll be back."

I gritted my teeth. He was taking the trick after all. He was putting him out, with a dodge that tied my tongue. If there had been a cliff handy I would have pushed him off. But it didn't work. Busch looked at Elma, who was in the red leather chair. That turned his head so I couldn't see his face, but there must have been a question on it, for she answered it.

"He's going to do what he says, Mr. Busch. He's going to make a monkey of an Inspector named Cramer. If he wants you to tell him anything—and if you want to—"

"I want—Will you marry me?"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Will you marry me?"

She stared, speechless.

"Effective, Mr. Busch," Wolfe growled. His dodge wasn't going to work. "For establishing briefly and cogently that your concern is real, admirable. Then you don't believe that Miss Vassos was seduced by Mr. Ashby?"

"No. I know she wasn't."

"You told Mr. Goodwin that you don't know who told the police that she had been."

"I don't."

"But you knew that someone had."

"I didn't exactly know. I knew that the police thought that, or suspected it, from questions they asked me."

"Was that why you were so concerned for Miss Vassos' welfare that you went to her home last night and persuaded the janitor to let you in and repeated the performance today?"

"It was partly that, but I would have done that anyway. Yesterday she was worried about her father because he hadn't come home, and I tried to find out if he was in the building. Then last night the news came that he was dead, his body had been found. I phoned her home and there was no answer, and I went there, and

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there was no word from her today, and the police didn't know where she was, so I went again.

"I know what you're getting at, you want to know if I was there waiting for her because I was worried about her or because I wanted to kill her. Because someone must want to kill her, someone must have lied about her to her father and then lied to the police."

Wolfe nodded. "You're assuming that her father believed the lie and killed Ashby and then killed himself."

"No, I'm not. I only know he might have. From the way I'm talking to you, you probably think I'm a pretty good talker, that I don't have any trouble speaking my piece, but I've been wanting for more than a year to tell her how I feel, that I know how wonderful she is, that there's no girl on earth like her, that I have never—"

"Yes. You established that point by asking her to marry you. She has probably grasped it. As you will no doubt hear from her when you get a chance, she is certain that her father would not have believed such a lie about her, so he did not kill Ashby, so he did not kill himself. Therefore I need to know as much as possible about people's movements at the critical times.

"According to the Medical Examiner as reported in the paper, Peter Vassos landed at the bottom of that cliff and died between ten o'clock and midnight Monday evening. Since Miss Vassos certainly won't marry you if you killed her father, let's eliminate you. Where were you those two hours?"

"I was at home. I went to bed about eleven o'clock."

"You live alone?"

"Yes."

"Good. You have no alibi. A man with an alibi is suspect *ipso facto*. Now for Mr. Ashby. Where were you at ten thirty-five Monday morning?"

"In my room. My office."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I've gone over this with the police. Miss Vassos had been there taking letters, but she left about a quarter-past ten. Pete came about a quarter to eleven and gave me a shine. In between those two times I was alone."

"You didn't leave your room?"

"No."

"Was the door open and did you see anyone pass?"

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"The door was open, but my room is at the end of the hall. I never see anyone pass."

"Then you can't help much. But you do corroborate Mr. Vassos' account of his movements. If he came to your room at ten forty-five, shined your shoes, and went straight to Mr. Ashby's room, he entered it about ten fifty-two. He arrived here at three minutes' past eleven. Do you know where he had been just before coming to you?"

"Yes, he had been in Mr. Mercer's room, giving him a shine."

"And before that?"

"I don't know. That's what the police wanted to know. They think he had already been in Ashby's room, that he went in by the other door and killed him."

"Did they tell you that?"

"No, but it was obvious from their questions—about him and about that other door."

"Does your room also have a door into the outer hall?"

"No. Ashby's is the only one."

Wolfe turned his head to look up at the wall clock. Half an hour till dinnertime. He looked at Busch. "Now, sir. As I told you at the beginning, I have concluded that Mr. Vassos did not kill Mr. Ashby, and I intend to find out who did and expose him. On this perhaps you *can* help. Who is safe or satisfied or solvent because Ashby is dead? *Cui bono*?"

"I don't get—Oh." Busch nodded. "Of course. That's Latin. The police asked me too, but not like that. I told them I didn't know, and I don't. I saw very little of Ashby personally, I mean outside of business. I knew his wife when she worked there, her name was Snyder then, Joan Snyder, but I've only seen her a couple of times since she married Ashby two years ago. The way you put it, safe or satisfied or solvent because he's dead—I don't know."

"What about people in the office?"

"Nobody liked him. I didn't. I don't think even Mr. Mercer did. We all knew he had saved the business, he was responsible for its success, but we didn't like him. I had complaints from the girls about him. They didn't like to go to his room. A few months ago one girl quit on account of him. When I took it up with Mr. Mercer he said Ashby had the defects of his qualities, that when he wanted something he never hesitated to go after it, and that was why the corporation's income was ten times what it had been four years ago. But when I say nobody liked him maybe I ought to

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say except one." His eyes went to Elma and back to Wolfe.

"Miss Vassos?"

"Good Lord, no." He was shocked. "Because I looked at her? I just happened—I just wanted to. Miss Cox, Frances Cox, the receptionist. Ashby wouldn't have a secretary, and Miss Cox did the things for him that a secretary does, appointments and so on, except stenography. Maybe she liked him; I suppose she must have. There was a lot of office gossip about them, but you can't go by office gossip. If an office manager took all the gossip seriously he'd go crazy. Only one day last spring Ashby's wife—I told you she was Joan Snyder when she worked there—she came and asked me to fire her."

"To fire Miss Cox?"

"Yes. She said she was a bad influence on her husband. I had to laugh, I couldn't help it—a bad influence on Dennis Ashby. I told her I couldn't fire her, and I couldn't. Ashby had had her salary raised twice without consulting me."

Wolfe grunted. "Another name Miss Vassos has mentioned. Philip Horan. Since he's a salesman, I presume he worked under Ashby?"

"Yes."

"He had expected to get the promotion that Ashby had got?"

"Yes."

"And he resented it?"

"Yes."

"Then Ashby's death is no bereavement for him?"

"No."

"You are suddenly laconic. Have I touched a nerve?"

"Well . . . I thought Phil Horan deserved to get that job, and I still think so."

"And he'll get it now?"

"I suppose he will."

"I won't ask if he might have killed Ashby to get it; you're partial and would of course say no." Wolfe looked up at the clock. "Have you ever sat at table with Miss Vassos, had a meal with her?"

"I don't see what bearing that has on—"

"None, but it's a civil question. Have you?"

"No. I asked her twice, but she declined."

"Then it was foolhardy to ask her to marry you. You can't know what a woman is like until you see her at her food. I invite you to

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dine with us. There will be chicken sorrel soup with egg yolks and sherry, and roast quail with a sauce of white wine, veal stock, and white grapes. You will not be robbing us; there is enough."

I didn't catch his response because I was commenting to myself. The rule of no business at meals was strictly enforced, but I would have to work right through the soup and quail on to the cheese and coffee, as an expert, taking Busch in. When he left I would be asked if his concern for Miss Vassos was real or phony, yes or no. If I couldn't say, some good grub would have been wasted.

It was wasted.

The fur started to fly, the first flurry, a little after two Thursday afternoon, when Parker phoned while we were eating lunch—Elma with us—to say that he had just had a talk with an attorney representing John Mercer, Philip Horan, and Frances Cox. He had called before noon to say that all five of them had been served. He had told the attorney that his client, Elma Vassos, had retained him and told him to bring the actions after she had been advised to do so by Nero Wolfe, who was investigating the situation for her; that he was satisfied his client had a valid complaint but he wouldn't discuss it with the opposing counselor until the investigation had progressed further; that after careful consideration he felt that it would probably be impossible to arrive at a settlement without a court trial; and that he would of course report the conversation to his client, who was staying at Nero Wolfe's house.

I returned to the dining room and relayed it to Wolfe, who would not interrupt a meal to speak on the phone.

The next flurry came two hours later, from the widow. Wolfe had gone up to the plant rooms, and Elma had gone with him to look at the orchids. Not that he had thawed any; he had got the notion that she was working on me and the less we were alone together the better. The phone rang and I answered it. "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"I want to talk to Elma Vassos." A woman's voice, peevish.

"Your name, please?"

"Oh, indeed. Is she there?"

"Not in the room, but I can get her. If you don't mind giving me your name?"

"I don't mind a bit. Joan Ashby. Don't bother to get her; you'll do, if you're Archie Goodwin. I've just been talking to that lawyer,

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Parker, and he told me she's at Nero Wolfe's house. I told him if she wants to sue me for a million dollars she can go right ahead, and I thought I might as well tell her too. He said he would prefer to speak with my attorney, and I said that would be fine if I had one. What would I pay an attorney with? Tell Elma Vassos if she gets some of those millions from those others I would deeply appreciate it if she would pay some of my husband's debts, and then maybe I could eat. I'd like to see her at that, I'd like to see the one that got him killed."

"Why don't you, Mrs. Ashby? Come, by all means. It's not far, if you're at home. The address is—"

"I know the address, but I'm not coming. When I went out this morning, from the bunch of reporters and photographers on the sidewalk waiting for me you might think I was Liz Taylor. I'd like to see her, but not enough to face that gang again. Just tell her all she gets out of me wouldn't buy her a subway token. If she wants—"

"She'd like to see you too."

"I'll bet she would."

"She really would. She said so last night. Why don't I take her there? We can be there in twenty minutes. You've lost a husband, and she has lost a father. It would do you both good."

"Sure. We can swap tears. Come ahead, but bring your own hankies. I use paper towels."

She hung up. I buzzed the plant rooms on the house phone, got Wolfe, and reported. He growled, "She's probably lying about the debts, and bluffing. I'll send Miss Vassos down at once. Don't bring that wretch back with you."

"But you wanted to see all of them."

"Not that one. Not unless it becomes imperative. Pfui. You will judge. Your intelligence guided by experience."

When Elma came—down the stairs, not in the elevator—I was waiting for her in the hall with my coat on. When I told her it might be a little hard to take, judging from Mrs. Ashby on the phone, she said she could stand it if I could, and when, after we got a taxi on Ninth Avenue and were crawling crosstown, I gave her the conversation verbatim, she said, "She sounds awful, but if he left a lot of debts—Of course that doesn't matter, since we don't expect to get anything . . ."

The number on East 37th Street, which had been in the papers, was between Park and Lexington. If there were any journalists on

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post they weren't visible, but daylight was gone, nearly five o'clock. Pushing the button marked Ashby in the vestibule, getting a voice asking who is it, and telling the grille our names, I pushed the door when the click came, and we entered.

It was a small lobby, aluminum-trim modern, and the elevator was a do-it-yourself. I pushed the "3" button, we were lifted and emerged on the third floor, and there was the widow, leaning against the jamb of an open door.

"Double wake," she said. "I just thought that up." She focused on us as we approached. "I thought up another one too. My husband liked what the ads said, go now, pay later. Eat now, pay later. I thought up kill now, pay later. I like it. I hope you like it." She didn't move.

It had been fairly obvious on the phone that she was tight, and she must have had another go. Under control and in order, she could have been a fine specimen, with big dark eyes and a wide warm mouth, but not at the moment. Elma had started to offer a hand but changed her mind. I said distinctly, "Mrs. Ashby, Miss Vassos. I'm Archie Goodwin. May we come in?"

"You're a surprise," she told Elma. "You're so little. Not teeny, but little. He liked big girls, like me, only he made exsheptions. You've got a nerve, suing me for a million dollars. I ought to be suing you for what he spent on you. Did he give you a gold flower with a pearl in the middle? You haven't got it on. There was one in a Jensen box when I went there that morning, the day he got killed. Kill now, pay later. I like it. I hope you like it." She fluttered a hand. "Thank you for coming, thank you very much. I just wanted to look at you. My God, you're little."

I was smiling at her, a broad friendly smile. "About that gold flower with a pearl in the middle, Mrs. Ashby. That you saw on his desk Monday morning. You didn't expect Miss Vassos to be wearing that, did you?"

"Certainly not. They've got that one, the police. I told them I saw it there and they said they had it." Her eyes went back to Elma, with an effort. "Of course you've got one. They all got one. Eighty bucks at Jensen's, sometimes more."

Elma parted her lips to say something, but I got in ahead. "I suppose your husband was in his room when you were there Monday morning, Mrs. Ashby? What time was it?"

"It was ten o'clock." She grinned at me. "You're a detective." She pointed a wobbly finger at me. "Answer yesh or no."

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"Yes, but I'm not a cop."

"I know, I know. Nero Wolfe. Look here, if I'm high I know it. I know what I said and what I signed. I went there that morning at ten o'clock, and I knocked on the door, and he opened it, and I went in, and he gave me forty dollars, and I came out, and I went and bought a pair of shoes with the forty dollars because the accounts at the stores had been stopped."

She straightened up, swaying a little, reached and caught the edge of the door, backed up, and swung the door shut with a loud slam.

I could have stuck a foot in to stop it, but didn't bother. The shape she was in, it would have taken more than intelligence guided by experience to sort her out, and I already had a better fact than I had expected to get in that she had been in Ashby's room Monday morning and the cops knew it. Of course they had checked it, and if the clerk who sold her the shoes had confirmed her timetable she was out. Maybe. I followed Elma to the elevator.

In the taxi Elma said nothing until it stopped at Fifth Avenue for a red light, then turned her head to me and blurted, "It's so ugly!"

I nodded. "Yeah. I told you she'd be hard to take, but I had to have a look at her. That kill now, pay later, that's okay, but the trouble is who does the paying?"

"Did she kill him?"

"Pass. She says he left her nothing but debts."

"It's so ugly. I don't want to sue her. Couldn't we stop it, I mean for her?"

I patted her shoulder. "Quit fussing. The damage has been done, and whoever gets it now has got it coming. You came and asked Mr. Wolfe for something and you're going to get it, so relax. You have just convinced me, absolutely, that you never went very far with Ashby. Knowing you were going to meet Mrs. Ashby, you put your lipstick on crooked. Not that I had any real doubt, but that settles it."

She opened her bag and got out her mirror.

Paying the hackie at the curb in front of the old brownstone, mounting the stoop with Elma, and using my key, I was surprised to find that the chain bolt was on, since it was only 5:30 and Wolfe would still be up in the plant rooms.

I was starting my finger to the button when the door opened

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and Fritz was there; he must have been in the hall on the lookout. He had his finger to his lips, so I kept my voice low to ask, "Company?"

He took Elma's coat and put it on a hanger as I attended to mine, then turned. "Three of them, two men and a woman, in the office. Mr. Mercer, Mr. Horan, and Miss Cox. The door is closed. I don't like this, Archie, I never do, you know that, having to watch people—"

"Sure. But if they brought a bomb it won't go off till they leave." I didn't bother about my voice since the office was soundproofed, including the door. "When did they come?"

"Just ten minutes ago. Mr. Wolfe said to tell them to come back in an hour, but they insisted, and he said to put them in the office and stay in the hall. I told him I was making *glace de viande,* but he said one of them is a murderer. I want to do my share, you know that, Archie, but I can't make good *glace de viande* if I have to be watching murderers."

"Certainly not. But he could be wrong. It's possible that Miss Vassos and I have just been interviewing the murderer, who is plastered." I turned to Elma. "This could be even uglier, so why don't you go up to your room? If you're needed later, we'll let you know."

"Thank you, Mr. Goodwin," she said and headed for the stairs. Fritz made for the kitchen, and I followed. He went to the big table, which was loaded with the makings of meat glaze, and, after getting the milk from the refrigerator and pouring a glass, I went to the small table against the wall, where the house phone was, and buzzed the plant rooms.

"Yes?"

"Me. Miss Vassos has gone to her room and I'm in the kitchen. Report on Mrs. Ashby." I gave it to him. "So it's just as well I wasn't supposed to bring her; I would have had to carry her up the stoop. Notice that I didn't pry it out of her that she was there Monday morning, she tossed it in. Verdict reserved. Any instructions about the company in the office?"

"No."

"Do you want me up there?"

"No. I've been interrupted enough." He hung up.

The genius. If he had a program beyond a fishing party, which I doubted, I could guess my part as we went along. I finished the milk, taking my time, and went to the alcove in the hall and slid

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the panel, uncovering the hole. On the alcove side the hole is an open rectangle; on the office side it is hidden by a picture of a waterfall which you can see through from the alcove.

John Mercer, president of Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., was leaning back in the red leather chair, patting the chair arms with his palms. His white hair was thin but still there, and he looked more like a retired admiral than a bobbin merchant. Fritz had put yellow chairs in front of Wolfe's desk for the other two. They were talking in the low voices people use in a doctor's waiting room, something about a phone call that had or hadn't come from some customer.

Philip Horan was broad-shouldered and long-armed, with a long bony face and quick, moving brown eyes. Frances Cox was a big girl, a real armful, but her poundage was well distributed. Nothing about her smooth smart face suggested that she had been through three tough days, though she must have been.

I stayed at the hole, sizing them up, until the sound came of the elevator, then rounded the corner to the office door, opened it, and stayed there as Wolfe entered. He crossed to his desk, stood, and sent his eyes around. He fixed them on Mercer and spoke.

"You are John Mercer?"

"I am." It came out hoarse, and Mercer cleared his throat. "Miss Frances Cox. Mr. Philip Horan. We want—"

Wolfe cut him off. "If you please." I had gone to my desk, and he sent me a glance. "Mr. Goodwin." He stayed on his feet. "I question the propriety of this, Mr. Mercer. Miss Vassos has brought an action at law against you three, and communication should be between her counselor and yours. I'm a detective, not a lawyer."

Mercer had straightened up. "Your attorney told mine that you had told Miss Vassos to bring the action."

"I did."

"And that she's here in your house."

"She is. But you're not going to see her."

"Isn't that a little high-handed?"

"No. It's merely circumspect. She has resorted to the law to right a wrong; let the lawyers do the talking."

"But her lawyer won't talk! He says he won't discuss it until you have gone further with the investigation!"

Wolfe's shoulders went up an eighth of an inch and down. "Very well. Then why are you here? Did your attorney tell you to come?"

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"No. We're here to tell you there's nothing to investigate. Have you seen the afternoon paper? The *Gazette*?"

"No."

"It's on the front page. Inside are pictures of us and Inspector Cramer, and you. That kind of sensational publicity is terrible for a respectable business firm, and it's outrageous. All we've done, we've answered the questions the police asked us, investigating a murder, and we had to. What is there for you to investigate?"

"A murder. Two murders. In order to establish the ground for Miss Vassos' action for slander I need to learn who killed Mr. Ashby and Mr. Vassos. It seems discreet and proper for Miss Vassos' attorney to decline to discuss it with your attorney until I have done so."

"But that's ridiculous! Who killed Ashby and Vassos? *You* learn that? The police already have! My attorney thinks it's just a blackmailing trick, and I think he's right!"

Wolfe shook his head. "He's wrong; attorneys often are. He doesn't know what I know, that the police have *not* identified the murderer. The point is this: whoever killed those men is almost certainly responsible for the defamation of Miss Vassos' character, and I'm going to expose him. The actions brought by her are merely a step in the process, and manifestly a potent one, for here you are, you and Miss Cox and Mr. Horan, and it is highly likely that one of you is the culprit."

Mercer gawked at him. "One of *us*?"

"Yes, sir. That's my working hypothesis, based on a supportable conclusion. You may reject it with disdain and go, or you may stay and discuss it."

"You don't mean it. You *can't* mean it!"

"I can and do. That's what I'm going to investigate. The only way to stop me would be to satisfy me that I'm mistaken."

"Of course you're mistaken!"

"Satisfy me."

Mercer looked at Philip Horan and Frances Cox. They looked back and at each other. Miss Cox said, loud, "It *is* blackmail." Horan said, "We should have brought the lawyer." Miss Cox said, "He wouldn't come." Mercer looked at Wolfe and said, "How do you expect us to satisfy you?"

Wolfe nodded. "That's the question." He sat, and swiveled. "Conceivably you can, and speedily; there's only one way to find out. Mr. Horan. Did Mr. Vassos ever shine your shoes?"

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The doorbell rang. I got up and detoured around the yellow chairs to the hall, and switched on the stoop light. There facing me, his blunt nose almost touching the glass, was Inspector Cramer. From the expression on his big round red face he hadn't come to bring the million dollars.

It was sometimes necessary, when we had company, to use an alias when announcing a caller who might or might not be welcome, and any name with two Ds in it meant Cramer. I stepped into the office and said, "Mr. Judd."

"Ah?" Wolfe cocked his head at me. "Indeed." His brows went up. He turned to the company. "Mr. Cramer of the police is at the door. Shall we have him join us? What do you think?"

They just looked. Not a word.

"I think not," Wolfe said, "unless you want him." He pushed his chair back and rose. "You will excuse me." He headed for the door. I stepped aside to let him by and followed him to the front. He slipped the bolt in, opened the door the two inches the chain would allow, and spoke through the crack. "I'm busy, Mr. Cramer, and I don't know when I'll be free. Miss Frances Cox, Mr. John Mercer, and Mr. Philip Horan are with me. I came to tell you instead of sending Mr. Goodwin because it seemed—"

"Open the door!"

"No. I wouldn't object to your presence while I talk with these people, but you would—"

"I want to see Elma Vassos. Open the door."

"That's it." Wolfe turned his head, and so did I, at a noise from behind. Philip Horan's head was sticking out at the office door. Wolfe turned back to the crack. "That's the point. Miss Vassos will not see you. As I have said before, a citizen's rights vis-à-vis an officer of the law are anomalous and nonsensical. I can refuse to let you into my house, but once I admit you I am helpless. You can roam about at will. You can speak to anyone you choose. I dare not touch you. If I order you to leave you can ignore me. If I call in a policeman to expel an intruder I am laughed at. So I don't admit you—unless you have a warrant?"

"You know damn well I haven't. Elma Vassos has filed a complaint against me at your instigation and I'm going to discuss it with her."

"Discuss it with her attorney."

"Bah. Nat Parker. You call the tune and he plays it. Are you going to open this door?"

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"No."

"By God, I *will* get a warrant."

"On what ground? I advise you to watch the wording. You can't claim the right to enter my house in search of evidence. Evidence of what? You can't charge an attempt to obstruct justice; if you say I am hindering an official investigation, I ask what investigation? Not of the death of Dennis Ashby; from the published accounts and from what you said to Mr. Goodwin yesterday morning, I understand that case is closed. As for a warrant to search my house for Miss Vassos, that's absurd. In your official capacity you can assert no right to see her or touch her. She has violated no law by bringing a civil action against you. I advise—"

"She's a material witness."

"Indeed. In what matter? The People of the State of New York versus Peter Vassos for the murder of Dennis Ashby? Pfui. Peter Vassos is dead. Or have you abandoned that theory? Do you now think that the one who killed Ashby is still alive? If so, who are the suspects and how can Miss Vassos be a material witness against one or more of them? No, Mr. Cramer; it's no good; I'm busy; the cold air rushes through this crack; I'm shutting the door."

"Wait a minute. You know damn well she can't get me for damages."

"Perhaps not. But there's a good chance she can get you put under oath and asked who told you that she had improper relations with Dennis Ashby. Mr. Goodwin asked you that yesterday and you were amused. Offensively. Will you tell me now, not for quotation?"

"No. You know I won't. Are you saying she didn't? That Vassos didn't kill Ashby?"

"Certainly. That's why I got those people here. That's what I'm going to discuss with them. The actions brought—"

"Damn it, Wolfe, open the door!"

"I'm shutting it. If you change your mind about answering my question, you know my phone number."

Cramer has his points. Knowing that it would be silly to try to stop the door with his foot, since Wolfe and I together weigh 450 pounds, he didn't. Knowing that if he stood there and shook his fist and made faces we would see him through the one-way glass, he didn't. He turned and went.

Wolfe and I about-faced. Horan was no longer peeking; he had

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stepped into the hall and was standing there. As we approached he turned and moved inside, and as we entered the office he was speaking.

"It was Inspector Cramer. Wolfe shut the door on him. He's gone."

Frances Cox said, loud, "You don't shut the door on a Police Inspector."

"Wolfe did." Horan was back in his chair. Wolfe and I went to ours. Wolfe focused on Horan.

"To resume. Did Peter Vassos ever shine your shoes?"

Horan's quick-moving eyes darted to Mercer, but the president was frowning at a corner of Wolfe's desk and didn't meet them. They went back to Wolfe.

"No, he didn't. I suppose what you're getting at is did I tell Vassos about Ashby and his daughter? I didn't. I have never seen Vassos. I understand he always came around ten thirty, and I am never there at that time. I'm out calling on customers. I was there Monday morning and was with Ashby a few minutes, but I left before ten o'clock."

Wolfe grunted. "Your observed presence there Monday morning is immaterial. Anyone could have got into Ashby's room unobserved by the door from the hall, including you. I'm not after—"

"Then why pick on us, if *anyone* could have got in?"

"I have two reasons: a weaker one, the attack on Miss Vassos' character, and a stronger one, which I reserve. I'm not after who told Vassos about Ashby and his daughter; I don't think anybody did; I'm after who told the police. Did you?"

"I answered their questions. I had to."

"You know better than that if you're not a nincompoop. You did not have to. Telling them even about yourself and your movements was at your discretion; certainly you were under no compulsion to jabber about others. Did you?"

"I don't jabber. What I told the police is on record. Ask them."

"I have. You just heard me ask Mr. Cramer. You have more than once asked a female employee of your firm to find out about the relations between Mr. Ashby and Miss Vassos. What did she tell you?"

"Ask her."

"I'm asking you."

"Ask her."

"I hope I won't have to." Wolfe's eyes went right. "Miss Cox.

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What terms were you on with Mr. Vassos?"

"I wasn't on any terms with him." Her head was up and her chin was pushing. It was a nice chin when she left it to itself. "He was the bootblack."

"He was also the father of one of your fellow employees. Of course you knew that."

"Certainly."

"Did you like him? Did he like you?"

"I never asked him. I didn't like him or dislike him. He was the bootblack, that's all."

"Affable exchanges even with a bootblack are not unheard of. Did you speak much with him?"

"No. Hardly any."

"Describe the customary routine. He would appear in the anteroom where you were stationed, and then?"

"He would ask me if it was all right to go in. He always went to Mr. Mercer's room first. If someone was in with Mr. Mercer, it depended on who it was. Sometimes he wouldn't wish to be disturbed, and Pete would go to Mr. Busch first. Mr. Busch's room is across the hall from Mr. Mercer's."

"Are the two doors directly opposite?"

"No. Mr. Mercer's door comes first on the left. Mr. Busch's door is nearly at the end of the hall on the right."

"After he had finished with Mr. Mercer and Mr. Busch, Mr. Vassos would go to Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes, but that took him past the reception room and he would ask me on his way. If Mr. Ashby had an important customer with him he wouldn't want Pete butting in."

"Are there any others in that office whom Mr. Vassos served?"

"No."

"Never?"

"No."

"Was the routine followed on Monday morning?"

"Yes, as far as I know. When Pete came there was no one in with Mr. Mercer and he went on in. Then later he came and put his head around the corner and I nodded, and he went on to Mr. Ashby's room."

"How much later?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Did you see him enter at Mr. Ashby's door?"

"No, it's down the other hall. Anyway, I couldn't see him enter

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any of the doors because my desk is in a corner of the reception room."

"What time was it when he put his head around the corner and you nodded him on to Mr. Ashby's room?"

"It was ten minutes to eleven, or maybe eight or nine minutes. The police wanted to know exactly, but that's as close as I could come."

"How close could you come to the truth about Mrs. Ashby and Miss Vassos?"

It took her off balance, but only for two seconds, and she kept her eyes at him. She raised her voice a little. "You think that's clever, don't you?"

"No. I'm not clever, Miss Cox. I'm either more or less than clever. What did you tell the police about Mr. Ashby and Miss Vassos?"

"I say what Mr. Horan said. Ask them."

"What did you tell them about Mr. Ashby and yourself? Did you tell them that you and he were intimate? Did you tell them that Mrs. Ashby once asked an officer of the corporation to discharge you because you were a bad influence on her husband?"

She was smiling, a corner of her mouth turned up. "That sounds like Andy Busch," she said. "You don't care who you listen to, do you, Mr. Wolfe? Maybe you're less than clever."

"But I'm persistent, madam. The police let up on you because they thought their problem was solved; I don't, and I won't. I shall harass you, if necessary, beyond the limit of endurance. You can make it easier for both of us by telling me now of your personal relations with Mr. Ashby. Will you?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"There will be." Wolfe left her. He swiveled to face John Mercer in the red leather chair. "Now, sir, I applaud your forbearance. You must have been tempted a dozen times to interrupt and you didn't. Commendable. As I told you, the only way to stop me would be to satisfy me that I'm mistaken, and Mr. Horan and Miss Cox have made no progress. I invite you to try. Instead of firing questions at you—you know what they would be—I'll listen. Go ahead."

When Mercer had finished his study of the corner of Wolfe's desk he had turned his attention not to Wolfe, but to his salesman and receptionist. He had kept his eyes on Horan while Wolfe was questioning him, and then on Miss Cox, and, since I had him

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full-face past the profiles of the other two, I didn't have to be more than clever to tell that his immediate worry wasn't how to satisfy Wolfe but how to satisfy himself. And from his eyes when he moved them to Wolfe, he still wasn't sure. He spoke.

"I want to state that I shouldn't have said that my attorney thinks this is a blackmailing trick. I want to retract that. I admit it's possible that Miss Vassos has persuaded you—that you believe she has been slandered and you're acting in good faith."

Wolfe said, "Ummf."

Mercer screwed his lips. He still wasn't sure. He unscrewed them. "Of course," he said, "if it's just a trick, nothing will satisfy you. But if it isn't, then the truth ought to. I'm going to disregard my attorney's advice and tell you exactly what happened. It seems to me—"

Two voices interrupted him. Horan said, "No!" emphatically, and Miss Cox said, "Don't, Mr. Mercer!"

He ignored them. "It seems to me that's the best thing to do to stop this—this publicity. I told the police about Miss Vassos'—uh—her association with Mr. Ashby, and Mr. Horan and Miss Cox corroborated it. All three of us told them. It wasn't slander. You may be right that we weren't legally *compelled* to tell them, but they were investigating a murder, and we regarded it as our duty to answer their questions. According to my attorney, if you go on with it and the case gets to court, it will be dismissed."

Wolfe's palms were flat on his desk. "Let's make it explicit. You told the police that Miss Vassos had been seduced by Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that? I assume that you hadn't actually witnessed the performance."

"No. I asked him. There had been complaints about his conduct with some of the employees, and I had been told specifically about Miss Vassos."

"Told by whom?"

"Mr. Horan and Miss Cox."

"Who had told them?"

"Ashby himself had told Miss Cox. Horan wouldn't say where he had got his information."

"And you went to Ashby and he admitted it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last week. Wednesday. A week ago yesterday."

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Wolfe closed his eyes and took in air, through his nose, all the way down, and let it out through his mouth. He had got more than he had bargained for. No wonder the cops and the D.A. had bought it. He took on another load of air, held it a second, let it go, and opened his eyes. "Do you confirm that, Miss Cox? That Ashby himself told you he had seduced Miss Vassos?"

"Yes."

"Who told you, Mr. Horan?"

Horan shook his head. "Nothing doing. I didn't tell the police and I won't tell you. I'm not going to drag anyone else into this mess."

"Then you didn't regard it as your duty to answer *all* their questions."

"No."

Wolfe looked at Mercer. "I must consult Miss Vassos and her attorney. I shall advise her either to withdraw her action, or to pursue it and also to prefer a criminal charge against you three, conspiracy to defame her character—whatever the legal phrase may be. At the moment I don't know which I shall advise."

He pushed back his chair and arose. "You will be informed, probably by her attorney through yours. Meanwhile—"

"But I've told you the *truth*!"

"I don't deny the possibility. Meanwhile, I am not clear about the plan of your premises, and I need to be. I want Mr. Goodwin to inspect them. I wish to discuss the situation with him first, and it is near the dinner hour. He'll go after dinner, say at nine o'clock. I presume the door will be locked, so you will please arrange for someone to be there to let him in."

"Why? What good will that do? You said yourself that anyone could have got into Ashby's room by the other door."

"It's necessary if I am to be satisfied. I need to understand clearly all the observable movements of people—particularly of Mr. Vassos. Say nine o'clock?"

Mercer didn't like it, but he wouldn't have liked anything short of an assurance that the heat was off or soon would be. The others didn't like it either, so they had to lump it. It was agreed that one of them would meet me in the lobby of the Eighth Avenue building at nine o'clock.

They left together, Miss Cox with her chin up, Mercer with his down, and Horan with his long bony face even longer. When I returned to the office after letting them out, Wolfe was still stand-

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ing, scowling at the red leather chair as if Mercer were still in it.

I said emphatically, "Nuts. Mercer and Miss Cox are both quoting a dead man, and Horan's quoting Anonymous. They're all double-breasted liars. I now call her Elma. If she passes Busch up I'll probably put in a bid myself after I find out if she can dance."

Wolfe grunted. "Innocence has no contract with bliss. Confound it, of course she's innocent, that's the devil of it. If she had misbehaved as charged, and as a result her father had killed that man and then himself, she wouldn't have dared to come to me unless she's a lunatic. There is always that possibility. Is she deranged?"

"No. She's a fine sweet pure fairly bright girl with a special face and good legs."

"Where is she?"

"In her room."

"I'm not in a mood to sit at the table with her. Tell Fritz to take up a tray."

"I'll take it up myself, and one for me. She'll want to know how you made out with them. After all, we've got her dollar."

Every trade has its tricks. If he's any good a detective gets habits as he goes along that become automatic, one of them being to keep his eyes peeled. As I turned the corner of Eighth Avenue at 8:56 that Thursday evening I wasn't conscious of the fact that I was casing the neighborhood; as I say, it gets automatic; but when my eye told me that there was something familiar about a woman standing at the curb across the avenue I took notice.

Right; it was Frances Cox in her gray wool coat and gray fur stole, and she had seen me. As I stopped in front of the building I was bound for, she beckoned and I crossed over to her. As I got there she spoke.

"There's a light in Ashby's room."

I rubbernecked and saw the two lit windows on the tenth floor. "The cleaners," I said.

"No. They start at the top and they're through on that floor by seven thirty."

"Inspector Cramer. He's short a clue. Have you got a key?"

"Of course. I came to let you in. Mr. Mercer and Mr. Horan are busy."

"With the lawyer?"

"Ask them."

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"The trouble with you is you blab. Okay, let's go up and help Cramer."

We crossed the avenue and entered. It was an old building and the lobby looked it, and so did the night man sprawled in a chair, yawning. He gave Miss Cox a nod as we entered the elevator, and on the way up she asked the operator if he had taken anyone to the tenth floor and he said no. When we got out she pointed to a door across the hall to the left and said, "That's Ashby's room."

There were two doors in range across the hall, the one she had pointed to, six paces to the left, and one six paces to the right with the number 1018 and below it MERCER'S BOBBINS, INC., and below that ENTRANCE. I asked if that was the reception room, and she said yes.

"This takes generalship," I said. "If we both go through the reception room and around, he hears us and ducks out this way. This door can be opened from the inside?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll stick here. Maybe you'd better get the elevator man to go in and around with you. He might get tough."

"I can take care of myself. But I'm not taking orders from you."

"Okay, I'll get the elevator man."

"No." Her chin was stiff again—too bad, for it was a nice chin. She moved. As she headed for the door to the right I told her back, not loud, "Don't try to stalk him. Let your heels tap."

As I went to the door on the left and put my back to the wall, near its edge that would open, I was regretting that I had disregarded one of my personal rules, made some years back when I had spent a month in a hospital, that I would never go on an errand connected with a murder case without having a gun along. When you're just standing and listening, your mind skips around.

For instance: what if Ashby had been in with a narcotics ring, and he kept bobbins full of heroin in the files in his room, and one or more of his colleagues had come Monday and bumped him, and they had come back to look for bobbins, and they now emerged with hardware?

Or, for instance: what if a competitor, knowing that Ashby was responsible for Mercer's Bobbins taking over his customers, had got desperate and decided to put an end—

The door opened, and the opener, not seeing me, was coming out backward, pulling the door shut, easy. I put my hand in the small of his back and pushed him back in, not too easy, and fol-

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lowed him. He stumbled but managed to recover without going down. Frances Cox's voice came. "Oh, it's you!"

I spoke. "This is getting monotonous, Mr. Busch. A door opens, and there you are. Are you surprising me, or am I surprising you?"

"You dirty double-crosser," Andrew Busch said. "I can't handle you, I know that, I found that out. I wish to God I could, and Nero Wolfe too. You lousy rat." He started for the door, not the one to the outer hall, the one where Miss Cox was standing.

"Wrong number," I said. "I didn't know who I was shoving. We don't owe you anything; we're working for Elma Vassos." He had turned and I had approached. "As for my being with Miss Cox, I wanted to have a look around and someone had to let me in. That's why I'm here. As I asked you once before, why are you here?"

"Go to hell. I think you're a damn liar and a rat."

"You're wrong, but I can't right you now. Of course you were looking for something, and if you found it I want to know what it is. I'm going over you. As you say, you can't handle me, but that's no disgrace. I'm bigger and stronger, and you're an office manager and I'm a pro. Stand still, please." I moved behind him.

I frisked him. Since he hadn't been expecting visitors it wasn't necessary to have him take off his shoes, but I made sure that he had no paper or other object on him that he might have found in that room. He didn't. Miss Cox had moved away from the door and stood and watched, saying nothing. Busch stood stiff, stiff as stone.

When I stepped back and said, "Okay, I guess you hadn't found it," he walked to the door, the inner one, and on out, without a word.

I looked around. Everything seemed to be in order; not even a drawer or a file was standing open. It was an ordinary executive office, nothing special, except that most of one wall was lined with filing cabinets. There was no hunk of polished petrified wood on the desk; it was probably still at the police laboratory.

I went to the door Busch had left by, crossed the sill, turned right, stepped nine paces to a door on the right, turned through it, and was in the reception room. Miss Cox was at my heels. Facing me was the door to the outer hall with MERCER'S BOBBINS, INC. on it. To the right of it were chairs. The wall on the left was lined with shelves displaying Mercer's Bobbins products. Near the

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corner at the right were a desk and a switchboard. On the chair nearest the door was Andrew Busch, sitting straight and stiff, his palms on his knees.

"I'm an officer of this corporation," he said. "I belong here. You don't."

I couldn't dispute that, so I ignored it and turned to Miss Cox. "That's your desk?"

"Yes."

"Where are Mercer's and Busch's rooms?"

She showed me, and I went for a look. It was like this: when you entered the reception room from the outer hall, the desk and switchboard were near the far left corner, and at the far right corner was the door into the inner hall. Passing through that door, if you turned left you went down a short stretch of hall with only one door in it, Ashby's, on the left; if you went straight ahead you were in a longer hall with a window at the end, and you came to Mercer's door first, on the left, and then Busch's door farther on, on the right. So, as Miss Cox had said, she could see none of the doors from her desk.

Another habit a detective forms is looking in drawers and cupboards and closets, on the principle that you sometimes find things you're not even looking for, and I would have pottered around a little in Mercer's and Busch's rooms, and Ashby's too, if Miss Cox hadn't been tagging along. I made a rough plan of the layout on a sheet of paper she furnished on request, folded it and put it in my pocket, and went to the chair where I had put my hat and coat.

"Just a minute," Andrew Busch said. He stood up. "Now *I'm going to search you.*"

"I'll be damned. You are?"

"I am. If you're taking something I want to know what it is."

"Good for you." I dropped my coat on the chair. "I'll make a deal. Tell me what you were after in Ashby's room and I'll let you finger me if you don't tickle."

"I don't know. I was going through his files. I thought I might find something that would give me an idea who killed him. I'm for Elma Vassos, and I think you're lying when you say you are. You came here with *her*." He aimed a finger at Frances Cox. "She's a liar too. She lied to the police."

"Can you prove it?"

"No. But I know her."

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"Watch it. She'll sue you for slander. Did you find anything helpful in Ashby's files?"

"No."

"Since you're an officer of the corporation, why did you scoot to the hall when you heard footsteps?"

"Because I thought it was her. I was coming back in this way to see what she was up to."

"Okay. You're wrong about Nero Wolfe and me, but time will tell. Frisking me will be easier with my hands up." I put them up. "If you tickle, the deal's off."

He wasn't as clumsy as you would expect, and he didn't miss a pocket. He even flipped through my notebook. With some practise he would have made a good dipper. When he was through he said all right and returned to his chair and I put on my coat and went to the door; and there was Miss Cox with her coat and stole on. Evidently she was seeing me out of the building. Not a word had passed between her and Busch since she had said, "Oh, it's you," and no more than necessary between her and me.

I opened the door and followed her through, and at the elevator she pressed the button, touched my sleeve with fingertips, and said, "I'm thirsty," in a voice I hadn't thought she had in her. It was unquestionably a come-on.

"Have a heart," I said. "First Busch is suddenly a bulldog, and now you're suddenly a siren. I'm being crowded."

"Not you." The same voice. "I'm no siren. It's just that I've realized what you're like—or what you may be like. I'm curious, and when a girl's curious . . . I only said I'm thirsty. Aren't you?"

I put a fingertip under her nice chin, tilted her head back, and took in her eyes. "Panting," I said, and the elevator came.

An hour and ten minutes later, at a corner table at Charley's Grill, I decided I had wasted $7 of Wolfe's money, including tip. Her takeoff had been fine, but she hadn't maintained altitude. After only a couple of sips of the first drink she had said, "What was that about asking Andy Busch once before why he was here? Where? I didn't know you had met."

I don't mind being foxed by an expert, it's how you learn; but that was an insult. I hung on, quenching her thirst with Wolfe's money and no expense account for a client's bill, as long as there was a chance of getting something useful out of her, then I put her in a taxi and gave my lungs a dose of fresh cold December air by walking home. It was 11:30 as I mounted the seven steps of

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the stoop; Wolfe would probably be in bed.

He wasn't. There were voices in the office as I put my coat and hat on the rack—voices I recognized, and the click of my typewriter. I proceeded down the hall and entered. Wolfe was at his desk. Elma was at my desk, typing. Saul Panzer was in the red leather chair, and Fred Durkin was in one of the yellow ones. I stood. No one had a glance for me. Wolfe was speaking.

"... but the sooner the better, naturally. It must be conclusive enough for me, and through me for the police, but not necessarily for a judge and jury. You will phone every hour or so whether or not you have got anything; one of you may need the other. Archie will be out much of the day; he will be with Miss Vassos arranging for the burial of her father and attending to it; but the usual restrictions regarding nine to eleven in the morning and four to six in the afternoon will not apply.

"Call as soon as you have something to report. I want to settle this matter as soon as possible. Whatever you must disburse can't be helped, but it will be my money; it will not be billed to anyone. Have that in mind. Archie, give them each five hundred dollars."

As I went and opened the safe and pulled out the cash reserve drawer I was remarking to myself that that sounded more lavish than it actually was, since it would be deductible as business expense. Even if they shelled it all out the net loss would be about two Cs of the grand. Of course there would also be their pay—$10 an hour for Saul Panzer, the best free-lance operative this side of outer space, and $7.50 an hour for Fred Durkin, who wasn't in Saul's class but was way above average.

By the time I had it counted, in used fives, tens, and twenties, Saul and Fred were on their feet, ready to go, the briefing apparently finished. As I handed them the lettuce I told Wolfe I had a sketch of the Mercer's Bobbins office if that would help them, and he said it wouldn't. I said it might be useful for them to know that I had found Andrew Busch in Ashby's room, hoping, according to him, to find something that would give him an idea about who had killed Ashby, and Wolfe said it wasn't.

Evidently I had nothing to contribute except my services as an escort for Saul and Fred to the door, opening it, and closing it after them, which I supplied, with appropriate exchanges between old friends and colleagues. When I returned to the office, Wolfe was out of his chair but Elma was still at the typewriter. I handed him the sketch, and he looked it over.

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He handed it back. "Satisfactory. Who let you in?"

"Miss Cox. Shall I report, or have you gone on ahead with Saul and Fred?"

"Report."

I did so, and he listened, but when I had finished he merely nodded. No questions. He told me Miss Vassos was typing the substance of a conversation she had had with him, said good night, and went out to his elevator. Elma turned to say she was nearly through and did I want to read it, and I took it and sat in the red leather chair.

It was four pages, double-spaced, not margined my way, but nice and clean, no erasing or exing out, and it was all about her father—or rather, what her father had told her at various times about his customers at Mercer's Bobbins, and one who hadn't been a customer, Frances Cox. Apparently he had told her a lot, part fact and part opinion.

DENNIS ASHBY. Pete hadn't thought much of him except as a steady source of a dollar and a quarter a week. When Elma had told him that Ashby was responsible for pulling the firm out of the hole it had been in, Pete had said maybe he had been lucky. I have already reported his reaction when Elma told him that Ashby had asked her to dinner and a show, and now add that he said that if she got into trouble with such a man as Ashby she was no daughter of his anyway.

JOHN MERCER. Not as steady a customer as Ashby, since he spent part of his days at the factory in New Jersey, but Pete was all for him. A gentleman and a real American. However, Elma said, her father had been very grateful to Mercer because he had given her a good job just because Pete asked him to.

ANDREW BUSCH. Pete's verdict on Busch had varied from week to week. Before Elma had started to work there he had—But what's the use? This was what Elma saw fit to report of what her father had said about a man who had asked her to marry him just yesterday. That affects a girl's attitude. What she had put in was probably straight enough, but what had she left out?

PHILIP HORAN. Nothing. Elma corroborated Horan. Pete had never shined Horan's shoes and had probably never seen him.

FRANCES COX. I got the feeling that Elma had toned it down some, but even so it was positively thumbs down. The general impression was that Miss Cox was a high-nose and a female baboon. Evidently she had never turned siren on him.

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"I don't see what good this is," Elma said as we collated the original and carbons. "He asked me a thousand questions about what my father said about them."

"Search me," I told her. "I just work here. If it comes to me in a dream, I'll tell you in the morning."

At the moment, 3:30 Friday afternoon, that Saul Panzer was finding what Pete Vassos had scrawled on a rock with his finger dipped in his blood, I was at the curb in front of a church on Cedar Street, Greek Orthodox, getting into a rented limousine with Elma Vassos and three friends of hers. The hearse, with the coffin in it, was just ahead, and we were going to follow it to a cemetery somewhere on the edge of Brooklyn. I had offered to drive us in the sedan, which was Wolfe's in name but mine in practice, but no, it had to be a black limousine.

I had asked Elma if she wanted the stack of dollar bills from the safe, but she said she would pay for her father's funeral herself, so apparently she had some put away.

I wouldn't have been jolly even if it had been a wedding instead of a funeral, with Saul and Fred somewhere doing something, I had no idea where or what, and me spending the day convoying, on her personal errands, a girl on whom I had no designs, private or professional. The idea, according to Wolfe when I had gone up to his room at 8:30 A.M. for instructions, was that it would be risky to let her go anywhere unattended.

If I would prefer, I could get an operative to escort her and I could stay in the office to stand by. He knew damn well what I would prefer, to join Saul and Fred, and I knew damn well he wouldn't be blowing $17.50 an hour plus expenses if he hadn't had a healthy notion that he was going to get something for it. But we had had that argument time and again, and there would have been no point in repeating it, especially when he was at breakfast.

So I spent the day bodyguarding, and it didn't help much that the body I was guarding was 110 pounds of attractive female with a sad little face. I have nothing against sympathy when my mind is free, but it wasn't. It was with Saul and Fred, and that was very frustrating because I didn't know where they were. No doubt Elma's friends got the impression that I was a fish.

When we finally got back to Manhattan and the friends had been dropped off at their addresses, and the rented limousine

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stopped in front of the old brownstone, it was after six o'clock. Elma paid the driver. Mounting the stoop with her and finding that the door wasn't bolted, I knew that at least nothing had blown up, but, stepping inside, I saw that someone had blown in.

There on the hall rack were objects I recognized: a brown wool cap, a gray hat, a blue hat, and three coats. As I took Elma's coat I told her, "Go up and lie down. There's company in the office. Inspector Cramer, Saul Panzer, and Fred Durkin."

"But what—why are they—"

"The Lord only knows, or maybe Mr. Wolfe does. You're all in. If you want—"

Her look stopped me. She was facing the door. I turned. There on the stoop was John Mercer, with a finger on the bell button, with Frances Cox and Philip Horan behind him. I told Elma to beat it and waited until she had turned up the stairs to open the door.

So Wolfe thought he had it. I wondered, as I let them in and took their things and sent them to the office. More than once I had seen him risk it when all he had hold of was the tip of the tail, even with a big fee at stake, and with no intake but a dollar bill already spent and then some—he could be trying it with no hold at all.

He knew I was home, since Saul had appeared at the office door when the bell had rung and had seen me admitting the guests, and I had a notion to go to the kitchen and sit down with a glass of milk. If I joined the party I would be merely a spectator, and it might be a bum show. But while I was considering it another guest appeared on the stoop. Andrew Busch. I had the door open before he pressed the button.

Since I had crossed him off and I thought Wolfe had too, his coming meant there would be a real showdown, all or nothing, so I took him to the office and followed him in. And found that it was the full cast: Joan Ashby was on the couch at the left of my desk, with a mink coat, presumably not paid for, draped on her shoulders. Cramer was in the red leather chair. Saul and Fred were over by the big globe. Mercer, Horan, and Miss Cox were on yellow chairs in a row facing Wolfe's desk, and there was a vacant one waiting for Busch.

As I circled around the chairs, Wolfe told Busch he was late, and Busch said something, and, as I sat, Cramer said he wanted Elma Vassos there.

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Wolfe shook his head. "You are here by sufferance, Mr. Cramer, and you will either listen or leave, as agreed. As I told you on the phone, you can't expect to interfere in your official capacity, since you have closed your investigation of the only death by violence in your jurisdiction that these people are connected with. Or you *had* closed it. You agreed to listen or leave. Do you want to leave?"

"Go ahead," Cramer growled. "But Elma Vassos ought to be here."

"She's at hand if needed." Wolfe's eyes left him. "Mr. Mercer. I told *you* on the phone that if you would bring Miss Cox and Mr. Horan I thought we could come to an understanding about the actions Miss Vassos has brought. It seemed desirable for Mrs. Ashby and Mr. Busch to be present, and I asked them to come. I'm on better ground than I was yesterday. Then I only knew that Mr. Vassos had not killed Dennis Ashby; now I know who did. I'll tell you briefly—"

Cramer cut in. "*Now* I'm here officially! Now you're saying you can name a murderer! How did you know Vassos hadn't killed Ashby?"

Wolfe glared at him. "I have your word. Listen or leave."

"I'll listen to your answer to my question!"

"I was about to give it." Wolfe turned to the others. "I was saying, I'll tell you briefly how I knew that. Miss Vassos came to me Tuesday evening to engage my services. She said that someone had lied to the police about her; that the police were persuaded that she had been seduced by Ashby and her father had found out about it and had killed Ashby and then himself; that none of that was true; that her father had told her I was the greatest man in the world; that she wanted to hire me to discover and establish the truth; and in payment she would give me all the dollar bills, some five hundred, I had paid her father for shining my shoes over a period of more than three years."

He turned a palm up. "Very well. If she had in fact misbehaved, and if her misbehavior had been responsible for her father's committing murder and suicide, what on earth could possibly have impelled her to come to me—the greatest man in the world to her father, and therefore a man not to be hoodwinked—and offer me what was for her a substantial sum to learn the truth and expose it? It was inconceivable. So I believed her."

He turned his hand back over. "But I won't pretend that I was

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moved to act by the dollar bills, by the pathos of Miss Vassos' predicament, or by a passion for truth and justice. I was moved by pique. Monday afternoon, the day before Miss Vassos came, Mr. Cramer had told me I was capable of shielding a murderer in order to avoid the inconvenience of finding another bootblack; and the next day, Wednesday, he told Mr. Goodwin that I had been beguiled by a harlot and ejected Mr. Goodwin from his office. That's why—"

"I didn't eject him!"

Wolfe ignored it. "That's why Mr. Cramer is here. I could have asked the District Attorney to send someone, but I preferred to have Mr. Cramer present."

"I'm here and I'm listening," Cramer rasped.

Wolfe turned to him. "Yes, sir. I'll pass over the actions at law I advised Miss Vassos to bring; that was merely a ruse to make contact. I needed to see these people. I already had a strong hint about the murderer. So had you."

"If you mean a hint about somebody besides Vassos, you're wrong. I hadn't."

"You had. I gave it to you, half of it, or Mr. Goodwin did, when he reported verbatim my conversation with Mr. Vassos on Monday morning. He said he saw someone. He said that he had only said *if* he told a cop he saw someone, but it was obvious that he actually *had* seen someone. Also he told his daughter that evening that there was something he hadn't told either me or the police, and he was going to come and tell me in the morning and ask me what he ought to do; and he wouldn't tell his daughter what it was. Surely that's a strong hint."

"Hint of what?"

"That he knew, or thought he knew, who had killed Ashby. Where and when he had seen someone can only be conjectured, but it is highly probable that he had seen someone leaving Ashby's room. Not entering; you know the times involved as well as I do, or better; he must have seen him leaving, at a moment which made it likely that he had been in that room when Ashby left it by the window. And it was someone whom he did not want to expose, for whom he had affection or regard, or who had put him under obligation.

"There I have the advantage of you. Mr. Vassos and I had formed the habit, while he was shining my shoes, of discussing the history of ancient Greece and the men who made it, and I

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knew the bent of his mind. He was tolerant of violence and even ferocity, and the qualities he most strongly condemned were ingratitude and disloyalty. That was not decisive, but it helped."

Wolfe wiggled a finger. "So. The person, call him X, whom Mr. Vassos had seen in compromising circumstances and who was probably the murderer, was one who had earned his affection, his high regard, his gratitude, or his loyalty." He left Cramer and surveyed the others. "Was it one of you? That was the point of my questions yesterday afternoon when you were here, and of a discussion I had with Miss Vassos last evening. It isn't necessary to elaborate; as you know, only one of you qualifies.

"You, Mr. Mercer. You fit admirably; Mr. Vassos owed you gratitude for giving his daughter a job. By which door were you leaving Ashby's room when he saw you, the one to the outer hall or the other?"

"Neither one." Wolfe had telegraphed the punch, and Mercer had got set. "You're not intimating that *I* killed Dennis Ashby. Are you?"

"I am indeed." Wolfe turned to Cramer. "The question of which door isn't vital, but the inner one is more likely. You are of course familiar with the arrangement. If Mr. Mercer left by the door to the outer hall after killing Ashby, he would have had to get back in through the reception room and would have been seen by Miss Cox and anyone else who happened to be there. The other way, there was a good chance of being seen by no one, and he was seen only by Mr. Vassos, who had just entered the reception room and been nodded in by Miss Cox."

"You say," Cramer growled, "so far, damn little. I'm listening."

Wolfe nodded. "I thought it proper to explain what directed my attention to Mr. Mercer. After my talk last evening with Miss Vassos I called in Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin. You know them. Mr. Goodwin wouldn't be available today. There was a possibility that Mr. Mercer was not the only likely candidate, that there was someone in another office in that building who qualified—whom Mr. Vassos would have been reluctant to expose and who might have had a motive for killing Ashby. Mr. Durkin's job—"

"Did Mercer have a motive?"

"I'll come to that. Confound it, don't interrupt! Mr. Durkin's job was to explore that possibility, and he has spent the day at it. No negative can be established beyond question, but he found no one who met the specifications; and he got some suggestive informa-

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tion. On the sixth floor of that building is a firm which is the chief competitor of Mercer's Bobbins, and its president told Mr. Durkin that Ashby's death was a blow to him because he had been discussing with him the possibility of Ashby's coming to his firm and they had been approaching agreement on terms.

"It could be that man had been so harassed by a competitor that he had killed him, but he fails the other test. He had never had his shoes shined by Mr. Vassos. Only two people in that office had, and only occasionally, and neither of them had put him under any obligation of affection or gratitude or loyalty."

Wolfe took a breath. His eyes stayed on Cramer. "Before calling on Mr. Panzer, I'll dispose of Miss Vassos. Your information about her came from three sources, and probably you would have tested them further if her father had not died as he did outside your jurisdiction; but even so you are open to a charge of nonfeasance. Miss Cox and Mr. Mercer gave Ashby as *their* source, and he was dead. Were they lying?

"Mercer's reason for lying is of course manifest, since he had himself killed both Ashby and Mr. Vassos. As for Miss Cox, Ashby may have boasted to her of a feather he had not in fact gathered, or she may be a born liar, or she—pfui. She's a woman. Pry it out of her when you have nothing better to do. As for—"

"I still believe it," Frances Cox said, loud.

Wolfe didn't give her a glance. "As for Mr. Horan, you know, of course, that he coveted Ashby's job. He has refused to name the source of his information. He may have been lying, or he may have himself been misled. That's immaterial now; I'll move to what *is* material. Saul?"

Saul Panzer got up, went to Mercer's chair, and stood behind it, facing Cramer. There was nothing about him to catch the eye; he looked just ordinary, but people who had dealt with him knew better, and Cramer was one of them.

"My job," he said, "was to check on John Mercer for Monday evening. Mr. Wolfe's theory was that he knew Vassos had seen him leaving Ashby's room that morning, and that evening he phoned him and arranged to meet him. They met, and Mercer had a car, and he drove across the river to Jersey and to a place he knew about. He slugged Vassos with something, stunned him, or killed him, and pushed him over the edge of the cliff. That was the theory, and—"

"To hell with the theory," Cramer snapped. "What did you get?"

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"I was lucky. I couldn't start at Mercer's end, for instance at the garage where he kept his car, because I had no in. So I went to Graham Street to try to find someone who had seen Vassos leaving the house that evening. You know how that is, Inspector, you can spend a week at it and come out empty, but I was lucky. Within an hour I had it.

"Mr. Wolfe has told me to keep the details for later, since Mercer is here and listening, but I have the names and addresses of three people who saw Vassos get into a car at the corner of Graham Street and Avenue A on Monday evening a little before nine o'clock. There was only one person in the car, the man driving it, and they can describe him. Then I—"

"Did you describe him for them?"

"No. I'm dry behind the ears, Inspector. Then I wasted an hour trying to pick up the car this side of the river. Then I got my car and drove to Jersey and spent two hours trying to pick up the car at that end. I found a law officer I know, a state man, and he went with me to the cliff. After looking around at the top and finding nothing useful, but it ought to be gone over right, we climbed down to where Vassos' body was found. That should be gone over too, better than it has been, but we found one thing that shouldn't have been missed by a Boy Scout.

"Vassos hadn't been dead when Mercer pushed him over. He died after he reached the bottom, and before he died he dipped his finger in his blood and printed M, E, R, C, on a rock. It wasn't very distinct, and there was more blood around, but it should have been noticed. It's still there and is now being protected. The state man is a good officer, and it will be there. I went to a phone and called Mr. Wolfe and he told me to come in. Of course I had already reported what I had found at Graham Street."

Cramer had come forward in his chair. "Did you and the state man climb down together?" he demanded.

Saul smiled. His smile is as tender as he is tough, and it helps to make him the best poker player I know. "With the blood four days old? How could I? Jab myself in the leg and use some of mine, nice and fresh? And it might not match."

"I want the names and addresses of those three people." Cramer stood up. "And I want to use the phone."

"No," Wolfe snapped. "Not until you have taken Mr. Mercer into custody. Look at him. If he is allowed to walk out of here, he might do anything. Besides, I haven't finished. After getting a re-

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port from Mr. Durkin this afternoon, I phoned Mrs. Ashby." He looked at her. "Will you tell Mr. Cramer what you told me?"

I didn't turn to see her, back of me on the couch, because that would have taken my eyes away from Mercer. But I heard her. "I told you that my husband hadn't decided whether to leave Mercer's Bobbins or not. He had told Mr. Mercer that he would stay if he got fifty-one per cent of the stock of the corporation, and if he didn't get it he would go to another firm. Just last week he told him he had to know by the end of the month."

"He told me the same thing," Frances Cox said, loud. "He said if he left he wanted to take me with him. I've thought all along that probably Mr. Mercer killed him." She was a real prize, that Cox girl. "But I didn't say so because I had no real—"

Mercer stopped her. His idea was to stop her by getting his fingers around her throat, but he didn't quite make it because Saul was there. But he was fast enough and strong enough, in spite of his age, to make a stir. Cramer came on the bound, Joan Ashby let out a scream, Horan scrambled up, knocking his chair over, and of course I was there.

For the first time in my life I saw a man frothing at the mouth, and I wouldn't care to see it again. The line of foam seeping through Mercer's lips, as Saul pinned him from behind, was exactly the color of his hair.

"All right, Panzer," Cramer said. "I'll take him."

I looked away and became aware that we were shy a guest. Andrew Busch had disappeared. He didn't know which room was Elma's, and he would probably barge into Wolfe's room, so I went out to the stairs and on up.

At the first landing a glance showed me that the door of Wolfe's room was closed, so I kept going. At the second landing the door of the South Room was standing open, and I went to it. Elma, over by a window, saw me, but Busch's back was to me. He was talking.

"... so, it's all right, everything's all right, and that Nero Wolfe *is* the greatest man in the world. I've already asked you if you'll marry me, so I won't ask you again right now, but I just want to say ..."

I turned and headed for the stairs. He may have been a good officer manager, but as a promoter he had a lot to learn. The darned fool was standing ten feet away from her. That is not the way to do it.

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Michael Gilbert

The Death of Mrs. Key

One of the nastiest crimes in the calendar of crime is the sending of an anonymous letter deliberately calculated to do mischief—or worse. Few happenings made Inspector Petrella lose his cool, but an epidemic of anonymous letters—an epidemic of them!—turned him into a wrathful avenger . . .

Detective: INSPECTOR PETRELLA.

The anonymous letter, written in capitals on a sheet of plain white paper, said, "How much did Fred Barron pay you to perjure yourself? I expect Scotland Yard would like to know. So I'm going to tell them. Not now. Probably next week."

"When did you get this?" Petrella asked.

"This morning," said Constable Owers. He looked half amused, half angry. "I kept the envelope. I thought you'd want it."

The envelope was a large yellow one, and Constable Owers' name and address were neatly typed on it.

"Whoever sent it," said Petrella, "can't have known a lot about police procedure."

Fred Barron had long been under suspicion of being a receiver of stolen goods, and this was the charge that the police would dearly have liked to pin on him. The Director of Public Prosecutions had studied the available evidence, and had advised against it. A summons under the Shops Act, which they could make stick, had been substituted. Constable Owers had been the main police witness, but the decision on which charge to prefer had been nothing to do with him.

"I wasn't worried," said Owers, "but I thought you ought to see it. I heard a buzz quite a lot of people have been getting billy-doos like this."

"I heard the same," said Petrella. "I did wonder if Mrs. Key might have been getting them."

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This was on Saturday. Mrs. Key had died on Thursday. She was a frail lady, in her middle sixties, crippled with arthritis. Sometime during the evening, after her companion and helper, Mrs. Oldenshaw, had departed and she was quite alone, she had wheeled herself, in her invalid chair, into the kitchen, had shut the windows and door and blocked up the gap under the door with a roller towel, and had turned on all the taps on her gas cooker.

Neighbors coming back late that night had smelled the gas and called the police.

"What makes 'em do it?" said Owers. "Send letters like that, I mean. That last bit, about waiting before reporting me. It was meant to make me sweat, wasn't it?"

"One part badness and three parts madness. If everyone was as sensible as you and brought them straight along to us, we might have a chance of catching them. I wonder how many people have had them and kept quiet."

An unexpected answer to this question was in the offing.

Sunday was not a guaranteed day of rest for a C.I.D. officer, but when the exigencies of his job allowed, Petrella liked to go to Matins or Evensong at St. Marks, which was the parish church of Riverside South. He enjoyed hearing the rector. The Reverend Patrick Amberline had been many things before, late in life, he had come to the Church. He was a man who was large in every dimension of body and mind.

On this particular Sunday evening, having heaved himself up into the pulpit like an elderly circus elephant mounting a tub, he opened the proceedings by saying, "I have some news for you. I am"—he consulted a paper which he had in his hand—"a lecherous beast and a seducer of young girls. In fact, a thoroughly dirty old man." After a moment of stunned silence the church rocked with laughter.

When order had been restored, the rector said, "It's really no laughing matter. I propose to pin this remarkable communication onto the notice board in the porch so that you may see it for yourselves. The bit about making improper advances to the ladies in the choir, you'll have to take with a pinch of salt. I'm too fat to make advances, and they're much too sensible to receive them. However, my object in mentioning this"—he paused and looked round the congregation—"was a serious one. If any of you have received these products of a sick mind, don't hide them. The answer to corruption is fresh air. Show them to everyone. Above all,

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show them to the police. And now, to my text for today—"

During the sermon Petrella cast an eye over the young ladies of the choir and wondered which of them the anonymous letter writer had had in mind. Two rather severe ones, with glasses. Two flashy blondes. Two or three who were obviously schoolgirls. One redhead, a bit older than the others, and more self-possessed; she looked the most plausible candidate.

Coming out of church, and noticing the chattering groups that had gathered at the door, Petrella came to the conclusion that Father Amberline had done the preliminary part of the police work more effectively than they could possibly have done it themselves.

The results started to come into Patton Street Police Station at an early hour on Monday. Petrella left the scholarly Sergeant Ambrose to deal with them and walked around to Mrs. Key's little terrace house in Smarden Lane.

He found two people there. He had met Mrs. Oldenshaw before. She was a woman designed by nature to be a companion, being negative in character and accommodating in disposition. The young man with her wore large round spectacles which made him look like an owl. He turned out to be Ronald Blanshard, Mrs. Key's nephew.

Petrella said, "I don't want to bother you with a lot of questions at a time like this, but we've got the inquest on Wednesday and there are one or two points we must clear up."

The owl-like young man blinked at him and Mrs. Oldenshaw said, "I can't hardly bring myself to speak of it. She was driven to it, poor soul, that I do know."

Petrella said, "That's what I was wondering about. She didn't leave any note behind her, but it did occur to me—"

He let the sentence hang. Mrs. Oldenshaw looked at the young man, who stared sadly back at her.

"If there was anything," said Petrella gently, "we must be told."

"It was all so beastly," said Ronald. "I've seen some of the letters—the ones she kept. Mrs. Oldenshaw just showed them to me. They accused her"—he seemed to have difficulty in getting the words out—"of killing both her brothers and her husband."

Petrella stared at him.

"They were all killed in action. Her older brother, my uncle Edward, on the Somme in the first war. Her younger brother George—he was my father—was killed in Germany in 1945." The

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young man paused, blinked in a very owl-like way, and added, "I can't remember him at all. To me he's just a photograph and some relics my mother keeps in a drawer at home."

Petrella said, "And her husband?"

"He was in the R.A.F. He was hot down on a bomber raid."

"But how could she possibly be blamed—"

"Read them for yourself," said Ronald.

They were detailed, ingenious, and horrible masterpieces of inneundo and spite. And they all said the same thing. "You drove your menfolk to the war. They didn't really want to go. You talked them into it. While you sat safely at home, they were torn to pieces by shrapnel, burst apart by high explosive, burned. Think of your husband, trapped in that bomber, roasting to death as it went down into the sea. Are you satisfied with the results? You've got all the family money now, you selfish barren bitch."

"Why on earth did she keep them?" said Petrella. "Why did she ever open them at all?"

"That was the devilish part of it," said Ronald. "They all came in different shapes and sizes of envelopes, with different kinds of typing on them. She couldn't avoid seeing them. Unless she refused to open any letters at all."

"There were telephone calls, too," said Mrs. Oldenshaw. "When she was alone here, in the evening. Whispering things to her."

Petrella swung round abruptly. He said, "I'll take all these letters. I see she kept some of the envelopes. I'll take them as well."

Back at Patton Street he found Sergeant Ambrose with a heap of papers on the table in front of him.

"Eighty-five to date," he said, "and more coming in. All handwritten in block capitals. All the envelopes typed."

Petrella said, "I want them analyzed. By recipients, by the subject matter of the threats, by dates, by postmarks, and by typewriters. Get all the envelopes up to Central. They've a man there who can tell you the make of machine from a line of typescript. I want the answers as quickly as possible."

He walked out of the room as abruptly as he had come into it. Sergeant Ambrose stared after him. He had never seen Petrella angry before. However, it was the sort of job he enjoyed and he set to work quickly and neatly.

Petrella made a telephone call to Central to make sure that the expert he wanted would be available and then paid a visit to the offices of Messrs. Mellors and Rapp, Solicitors and Commissioners

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for Oaths, who had an office in the High Street. They were the largest firm in Riverside South. They did most of the police-court work in that area, appearing sometimes for the police and sometimes for the defense, in the impartial way which is so puzzling to foreigners brought up on a system of state prosecution.

The senior partner, Mr. Charles Rapp, was tall and thin. He knew Petrella and received him without delay in his private room, a center point of calm in a maelstrom of clacking typewriters, buzzing telephones, and hurrying clerks.

"There's no reason you shouldn't know about it," he said when he had grasped what Petrella wanted. "As soon as we can get probate, a will becomes public property. Mrs. Key's will was very simple. She left a sum of £40,000 to her nephew and only surviving relative, Ronald Blanshard, provided he survives her by one full month. That's put in to avoid double death duties. Anything left over after payment of debts and duties and of this legacy to her nephew is to be invested in an annuity for her companion, Mrs. Oldenshaw."

"Will there be anything left?"

"Oh, yes. I should think so. Possibly as much as ten thousand pounds. It should provide a comfortable little annuity."

Petrella phrased his next questions cautiously. He knew that he was treading on delicate ground. He said, "Have you ever met Ronald?"

"He did come in here about a year ago, I think. To make his own will. He's an architect, I believe. He seemed a very nice young man." Mr. Rapp cocked a tufted eyebrow at Petrella.

"Oh, very," said Petrella. "I happened to run across him when I went round to the house. Do you know if he's married?"

"I fancy not. But I believe he told me he was engaged. I seem to remember warning him that when he got married it would invalidate his will, and he would have to make another one."

Petrella thanked Mr. Rapp and took off. On the way out he thought he saw a head of hair which he recognized, bent over one of half a dozen typewriters in the general office. The typist looked up, and the impression was confirmed. It was the readheaded young lady from the choir of St. Marks.

Petrella walked back slowly to Patton Street. A picture was shaping itself in his mind. It was blurred and indistinct as yet, like a photograph taken out of focus. And it was not a pleasant picture.

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Sergeant Ambrose had his first report ready. It covered ten foolscap pages of careful handwriting, and divided and subdivided the anonymous letters into every possible category, and carefully analyzed each. Petrella took it home with him that evening and read it over his supper. His wife observed the bleak look on his face and refrained from asking any questions.

On the following afternoon the report on the typewriters came in from Scotland Yard. Six different machines, it said. Two newish Lexingtons. One older and one very old Remington. One Italian Pulchrion. And one German Obermark. The report added, "None of the typefaces is perfect. If a same could be obtained from a suspected machine, a positive identification should be made available."

Petrella considered this, and gave Constable Owers certain instructions.

The last members of the staff of Messrs. Mellors and Rapp were usually away by six, and for the next hour the offices were in the hands of the cleaners. At 6:45 that evening Mrs. Burgess, who was dusting round young Mr. Mellors' room, was disturbed by a loud ringing of the front doorbell. She hurried to the door and found two policemen on the step.

The older one said, "I don't wish to alarm you, ma'am, or the other young ladies, but we've had a report that a person was seen climbing into these premises by a back window."

Mrs. Burgess said, "Oh, lor, what will they get up to next?"

"There's no cause to be alarmed," said Constable Owers. "If the intruder is still on the premises we can deal with him. But I think you ought to take these two young ladies to a place of safety."

The two young ladies, who were Mrs. Burgess' daughters, nodded vigorous agreement.

"It won't take us long to search the building. Suppose you walk across the street and have a nice cup of tea?"

This proposal was accepted with gratitude.

As soon as the ladies were gone, Owers said to his younger companion, Constable Brean, "Watch the door, Albert, and tell me if they show any signs of coming back."

He disappeared into the general office, selected six sheets of paper from the drawer of one of the desks, and set to work. He was by no means an expert typist, and it took him nearly ten minutes

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to type out, in upper and lower case, on each of six machines. "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog," followed by, "12 x £3456—78=90%?!"

When he had finished he replaced the typewriter covers and went out to reassure Mrs. Burgess and her daughters.

That same evening Petrella called on Father Amberline, who knew more about the lives, characters, and intentions of his flock than most parish priests, and told him what he suspected. He said, "You know the person concerned better than I do. Do you think that person *could* have done it?"

"Before answering that," said Father Amberline, "I'd need to be convinced that it was done at all."

"I think I can convince you," said Petrella.

When he had finished, the priest said, "There are certain people of whom I could have said, with certainty, it is impossible. With this person I am far from sure. There is a streak of hardness. If the money was sufficient, this person might have done it."

On Wednesday a coroner's jury returned a verdict on Mrs. Key of "suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed," and Ronald Blanshard was given authority to arrange for her cremation.

On Thursday morning Petrella saw Superintendent Watterson.

Petrella said, "It's about these anonymous letters. I know now who's been sending them."

"Can you prove it?"

"I think so. If you look at these lists you'll notice two odd things. The first is that the accusations are not vague and general. They're all quite definite. Some of them are silly things. Some dishonest. Some border on the criminal. In fact, just the sort of things you might expect a solicitor to hear about from his clients in the course of a day's work."

Watterson grunted. He had no great opinion of solicitors. Tiresome people who cross-examined policemen and threw dust into the eyes of magistrates.

"The second thing is that no one *except Mrs. Key* has had more than half a dozen. And she must have had nearly a hundred."

"You mean that all the others were a cover for the attack on her?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"And the object?"

"The object," said Petrella, "was to finish her. And it succeeded.

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The letters were written, and the envelopes were typed out by a Miss Eileen Fairweather. She is the secretary to young Mr. Mellors, junior partner in Mellors and Rapp. I'm told that she's a conscientious girl, and sometimes stays behind to finish Mr. Mellors' letters. This gives her the run of six different typewriters in the general office. She used different machines and different envelopes so that Mrs. Key would be bound to open the letters."

"Clever."

"Too clever. She didn't realize that the print of a typewriter can be identified as certainly as a fingerprint."

He laid six sheets of typing paper and six envelopes on the table, and said, "Central is quite definite about it. There's not the least room for doubt. Those envelopes were typed on the six machines in the offices of Mellors and Rapp."

"Why did she do it?"

"She did it for £40,000. She's engaged to Ronald Blanshard, who is Mrs. Key's only surviving relative, and inherits that sum under her will. She just couldn't wait for the old lady to die in the natural way."

Watterson brightened up. "That's better," he said. "That's something a jury will understand."

"I'm afraid it won't come to a jury."

"Why not? It seems a clear enough case."

"A case of what?"

The Superintendent started to say something, changed his mind, and said, "Hmm. Murder? Manslaughter? Conspiracy to procure suicide? I see there might be some difficulty there. What about demanding money with menaces?"

"She was careful never to ask for money."

"Public mischief then? Misuse of Her Majesty's mails?"

"That's more like it. A fine for a first offense."

"It doesn't seem adequate."

"It will be quite adequate," said Petrella grimly. "Once her name is mentioned in the papers there'll be fifty people round here after her blood."

The Superintendent considered the matter. He said, "Do we charge Blanshard as well? Do you think he was in it?"

"There's no direct evidence against him, but we'll soon know, won't we?" When Watterson looked puzzled, Petrella said, "As soon as the truth comes out. If he *was* in it with her, you may be sure he'll stick to his guns, brazen it out, and marry her. They'll

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have to move away and live somewhere else. But they'll go through with it. On the other hand, if he *didn't* know about it, he won't touch her with a barge pole. He'll refuse to have anything more to do with her. He would have no other course open to him."

Here Petrella was wrong.

Three days after the preliminary hearing in the Magistrate's Court had been adjourned for the defense to consider the technical evidence, a patrolling policeman found Ronald Blanshard's little car parked in a quiet turning behind Woolcoombe Park. Eileen Fairweather was in the front seat. She had been shot through the head. Ronald was slumped over her. After killing her he had shot himself. He had used a German automatic which his father had brought home as a souvenir on one of his leaves from North Africa.

Woolcoombe Park is not in Q Division, and Petrella only learned about it when he read the paper the following morning. Hard on the heels of the report came Mrs. Oldenshaw. She was so upset that it was a few minutes before Petrella could gather what she was trying to tell him.

She said, "What shall I do with it? The money, I mean. They say I shall have it all now. I don't want it!"

"You'd better consult the solicitors," said Petrella. "They'll tell you what to do."

"Oh, them. They just say it's mine, and I've got to have it. I wouldn't have said 'no' to a little bit. That's what Mrs. Key meant me to have. She didn't mean me to have it all."

"If you really want to get rid of some of it," said Petrella, "why don't you give it to Father Amberline, at St. Marks? His parish can use it."

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Robert Edward Eckels

Bread Upon the Waters

Is there a resurgence, a roguish revival, a renaissance, of con-man stories? We hope so: con-man stories, which have a noble and notable tradition in the history of the genre, are always fascinating reading—especially when they are as clever as this first recorded caper of Major Henry T. McDonlevy. (Are we fascinated because we secretly love to see others fleeced?)

"Bread Upon the Waters" is destined, we are sure, to be the first chuckle in a honeysuckle of a new series . . .

Criminal: MAJOR HENRY T. McDONLEVY

The first time I met the Major I was in jail, serving out a $100 fine for disturbing the peace at the time-honored rate of $1 a day. I understand inflation has played havoc with that as it has with all things these days, and the judges now trade the time you have for the money you haven't at the rate of $3 or even $4 a day. But be that as it may, it was $1 a day then. And by my reckoning I still had 72 days to go when the turnkey lumbered down the corridor, unlocked my cell, and jerked his thumb up to motion me to my feet.

"Vacation's over," he said. "It's back to the cold cruel world for you."

"Now?" I said. "Just when the chef is learning to make the hash the way I like it?"

The turnkey gave me a sour look. "You want to lay there and crack wise," he said, "or do you want to get out?"

I really didn't have to give that much thought. "I want to get out," I said.

I was curious, though, and at the entrance to the cell block I asked the bored clerk who passed over the envelope containing

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my meager personal possessions, "How come I'm being sprung?"

"Ask the man at the front desk," he said without looking up.

Which I did. "Your fine's been paid," he said. "By your friend over there," he added, nodding his head to indicate a short barrel-chested man with a square ruddy face, full gray mustache, and close-cropped hair of the same gray color. The man was standing near the door.

His face lit up as soon as he caught me looking at him curiously, and he advanced with his hand outstretched to grasp mine. "Ah, James," he said. "Thought I recognized you from your picture. Sorry not to have got here sooner, but I only just learned your whereabouts this morning. Still, better late than never, eh?"

"If you say so," I said, "although—"

"I have the advantage of you, eh? Of course. But let me rectify that." He drew himself to his full five-foot-five and thrust out his chest even farther. "Major Henry T. McDonlevy, late U.S. Army. And the world's greatest adjutant until some bureaucratic mixup got me passed over for promotion and forced my retirement. Still," he added cheerfully, "the Army's loss is your gain. Because if I hadn't retired I wouldn't have been your fellow lodger at Mrs. Peters' and therefore wouldn't have heard about your plight."

"Yes," I said, "that's all very interesting. But—"

"But you don't want to hang around a jailhouse discussing it. Of course not." He took my arm and guided me out through the double doors. "On a beautiful day like this," he went on, "a young man—and even an old one—can find better things to do."

I let him take me a couple of steps down the street. Then I carefully disengaged my arm. "I don't want to appear ungrateful," I said, "but I can't help wondering just why you'd plunk down $100 for a total stranger, fellow lodger or not."

The Major's face sobered and he nodded thoughtfully. "Yes," he said, "I suppose it does seem a little odd. "But," he continued, taking my arm again and pulling me with him down the street, "you see, my boy, I try to guide my life by the Good Book."

"You mean 'Do unto others' and that sort of thing?" I asked.

"No," the Major said, dragging the word out. "As a matter of fact, I had a different text in mind. Ecclesiastes ten, twenty: 'Cast thy bread upon the waters.' "

"Now," I said, "I do see. But if you're looking for a thousandfold return from me, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment. If I had any money, Major, or any prospects of getting any, I'd have paid

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that fine myself."

"I think you'll find the exact text is 'for thou shalt find it after many days,' " the Major said unperturbed. "Although I must admit most people would have it your way and I myself have found that my investments generally result in a tidy profit.

"As for your prospects. Well"—he coughed delicately into his cupped hand—"I'm afraid I overstated the case somewhat when I said we were fellow lodgers. Actually, I rented your room after you—ah—vacated it. Apparently, however, the postman wasn't aware of the change and this morning he delivered this."

He took an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to me. "I'm afraid I opened it—inadvertently, of course—before I noticed the name of the addressee."

"Of course," I said drily, opening the letter. It was three months old, having kicked around a bit before catching up with me, and it was clearly addressed to Thomas James.

"Dear Mr. James (it read), I regret to inform you that your great-uncle Arthur Wallace passed away on the 15th of last month, naming you his sole heir. If you will call at my office with proper proof of identity I will arrange transfer to you of his estate, said estate consisting of 750 acres in the heart of Michigan's vacationland."

It was signed Byron Swope, Administrator of the Estate of Arthur Wallace, Appleby, Michigan.

I glanced up from reading and as my eyes met the Major's he smiled brightly. "I took the liberty of doing a little research on your behalf," he said. "And the area *is* blooming, summer cottages being a big thing right at the moment."

I refolded the letter and stuck it in my pocket. "All right, Major," I said. "Fair's fair. I'll see you get your money back plus a reasonable profit."

"Fine," the Major said. He puffed out his chest and strutted along beside me. "We can discuss what constitutes 'reasonable' later, after the extent of my services has been determined. For now, though, let's concentrate on getting you to Michigan. And since one should never undertake a journey of that magnitude alone, I'll just trot along—if you don't mind."

Actually, whether I minded was something of a moot question. If I was going to get to Michigan at all, somebody was going to have to pay for the trip. And the Major was as good a prospect as any.

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I'd never been to Appleby, Michigan, but I had a pretty good idea of what the town was like from my mother's description of her childhood—a wide spot on the road somewhere between Tawas and Traverse City. As far as I could tell from my admittedly limited knowledge, about the only thing that had been added since her day was a sign at the edge of town proclaiming it "The Heart of Michigan's Vacationland."

I remarked as much to the Major as we drove past in the car we'd rented when we'd found that the only public transportation north from Saginaw was a bus.

"Tush, tush, my boy," he said. "Nobody's asking you to live here. We simply realize our profit and move on to greener pastures, as agreed."

"And the sooner the better," I said, surveying the weathering storefronts that made up Main Street. The area might be booming as the Major had said, but the town certainly wasn't being ostentatious about it.

Swope's office turned out to be a narrow book-and-paper-cluttered cubicle on the second floor above the town's only restaurant. And Swope himself was a tall spare individual in his mid to late sixties with small glittering eyes in a long narrow face and a tight, almost lipless mouth.

"Well," he said, as the Major and I presented ourselves, "this *is* something of a surprise. After all these months I'd just about decided you didn't intend to claim your inheritance."

That should have alerted me. What I mean is, people just don't *not* claim inheritances. Unless, of course, there's some reason not to. But to tell the truth, in the last several days I'd sort of got used to letting the Major make the decisions. So I just stood there and let him take charge now.

"No mystery," he said bluffly. "The lad had simply moved and I didn't manage to track him down with the news until just recently."

Swope favored the Major with a long cool glance, then turned back to me. "I suppose you've brought your birth certificate," he said.

"I did," I said and passed it over.

Swope examined it briefly, then nodded. "Seems to be in order," he said. "Now all we have to do is transfer the land formally to you. Let's see now. I've got one of those forms around here somewhere." He rummaged through his desk and the cabinets sur-

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rounding it, finally coming up with a legal-sized document which he began to fill in with a ballpoint pen, the only modern touch as far as I could see in the entire office.

"I should warn you, though," Swope said, "that this is going to cost you some money."

"I knew it," I said. I took hold of the Major's arm. "Come on, Major, Let's go."

But McDonlevy held back. "Not so fast," he said. "First let's find out how much."

"Well," Swope said, scratching behind his ear with the click button end of the ballpoint, "as I recollect, the taxes are paid through the end of this year, and there was enough in Arthur's bank account to cover my fee as administrator." His face brightened. "So all you have to pay is the standard recorder's fee of $20."

"Well," the Major said heartily, "I think we can afford that." He took two $10 bills from his wallet. "I assume we pay this to you," he said to Swope.

"That's right," Swope said, deftly lifting the bills from the Major's hand and stuffing them into his own pocket. "Among other things I'm deputy clerk of the court here and the recorder."

Swope set about finishing filling in the form, stamped it with an official-looking seal, and handed it to the Major who passed it on to me. I looked at it briefly, then folded it and put it in my coat pocket.

"Now that that's out of the way," the Major said, "my young friend and I would like to see the property. You can tell us how to find it, I assume."

"Sure," Swope said. "It's about five miles northeast of town. You can't miss it. It's the only slue land anywhere close by."

The Major looked blank. "I don't think I'm familiar with the term," he said. "Slue land?"

"I am," I said. I looked hard at Swope. "Do you meant to tell me that what I've traveled so far to inherit is nothing but a swamp?"

"Well," Swope said, " 'swamp' is probably too strong a word. But it is wet. Except in the winter, of course, when it freezes."

"Sure, though, man," the Major said, "it must be worth something?"

"It would be," Swope admitted, "if you could find a buyer. Which isn't too likely, I'm afraid, unless you can figure out how to drain it. About eight, ten years ago Arthur had some engineers

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up from Bay City. They said it wasn't 'feasible.' That means you can do it, but it'd cost more than the land's worth."

"I know what it means," I said. "Tell me, though, if the land's so worthless why did you bother to write me in the first place?"

"Had to," Swope said. "The law says the heir has to be notified." He smiled tightly. "I suppose I could have told you before you paid the transfer fee. But it never occurred to me."

"I'll bet," I said and left, followed by the Major.

"Sorry," I said to him outside, "but it looks as if you cast your bread on the wrong waters this time."

"Perhaps," he said. "But if I may mix metaphors—no battle's lost until the last shot's been fired."

"And just what shots do you plan to fire in this particular battle?"

"Who knows?" he said cheerfully. "But surely it wouldn't hurt to spend one night in the hostelry here, would it?"

I agreed it probably wouldn't. But I wasn't so sure when I saw the room they gave me. Still, I'd learned in jail that you can sleep anywhere and on anything when you're tired enough. And that's just what I was preparing to do—sleep—when the Major popped in. "Come, come, my boy," he said, "moping alone is no good. Let's be out where the action is."

"Action?" I said. "In Appleby, Michigan?"

"There's action everywhere, my boy," the Major said. "All it requires is a nose to ferret it out."

The particular action the Major's nose had ferreted out this time was a poker game at—of all places—Swope's bachelor quarters. Besides Swope there were two others present—a frail-looking, much younger man named Forbus who taught English at the local high school and a stolid hulk of a man named Mitchell whom I took to be a farmer.'

"Good of you to help us out, Major," Swope said. "The man who usually fills in the fourth chair had to go out of town and we don't like to play three-handed."

"My pleasure," the Major said, settling into the fourth chair.

Swope picked up the deck and began to shuffle. "Seven-card stud all right with everybody?" he said.

Forbus and Mitchell nodded, and so did the Major after a moment. "I'm more partial to draw," he said. "But when in Rome, you know."

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Swope gave the Major another of his long cool looks. "Yes, of course," he said, finished shuffling and began to deal.

Everybody seemed to take it for granted that I was just there to kibbitz. Which was fine with me, because seven-card stud is a game I try to avoid even when I'm flush. On the surface, it's a deceptively simple game. You're dealt two cards face down, then four more face up and another face down in rotation. Best poker hand based on any five cards wins. The kicker is that you bet after *every* card except the first two. In other words, there are five bets (six if there's a raise along the way) to be met on each hand. Compared with regular draw poker, stud is a real plunger's game where you can lose a lot of money in a very short time if you're not careful. Sometimes even if you are.

Partial to the game or not, the Major knew his way around a card table, and it soon became apparent—at least to me—that he and Swope were the only real poker players present. Forbus was the eternal optimist, always hoping for a miracle and consequently always staying with a hand too long. Mitchell, on the other hand, was an out-and-out bluffer who hadn't learned that bluffing works only when it's the exception to the rule.

Poker isn't entirely a game of skill, though. Luck enters into it as it does in everything else, and the other two couldn't help but win a pot now and then. And since both the Major and Swope played especially tight games, dropping out unless the third or fourth card showed strength, that wasn't as infrequent as you might expect.

So it began to look like the Major's "action" was just what it appeared to be on the surface—a friendly, not too exciting game in which not enough money was going to change hands to make or break anybody. Until 11:30, that is.

At 11:30 Forbus glanced nervously up at the clock on the mantlepiece as he passed his cards back to the dealer—Swope again—at the end of a hand. "Half an hour to go," he said.

"So it is," Swope said mildly. "We always make it a rule," he explained to the Major as he shuffled and reshuffled the cards, "to quit exactly at twelve. Saves argument and embarrassment. But," he added, "for that last half hour we pull out all the stops and play no limit. We find it makes a more interesting evening."

"I'm sure it does," the Major murmured. He straightened in his chair and put his hands flat on the table before him.

Something flickered momentarily behind Swope's eyes. Then he

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finished shuffling and began to deal the cards. The Major's first face-up card was an ace. Swope showed a king, Forbus a three, and Mitchell an eight. "Your bet, Major," Swope said.

The Major sat quietly for a moment, his fingers toying with a stack of white chips. "When a man says 'no limit'," he said at last, "I have to assume he means just that." He pushed the stack of chips forward into the pot. "Fifty dollars," he said.

That was exactly twenty-five times the highest bet made up to that moment, and it effectively served to separate the men from the boys. Forbus and Mitchell pushed their hands in and for all practical purposes joined the kibbitzers' circle, leaving the game to the Major and Swope.

With only two hands to deal, the game went faster than before. And by the time the large and small hands on the clock met at twelve, the Major owed Swope slightly over $900.

"I assume you'll accept my check," the Major said, reaching inside his jacket for his check book.

Swope's eyes went bleaker than usual.

"And," the Major added, "give me a chance to win it back before I leave town."

Swope's eyes brightened. "Planning on staying around for a while, are you, Major?" he said. "In that case, I'll be glad to take your check *and* honor your request."

He accepted the check the Major dashed off and, holding it loosely in his hand, walked with us to the door. "Same time tomorrow night then?" he said.

"Looking forward to it," the Major said.

I waited until we were about half a block away from the house. Then I said, "Operating on the assumption that that check is going to bounce back faster than a tennis ball, I suggest we just keep on going and not even bother stopping at the hotel. That Swope looks like a mean enemy and this is his town, not ours."

"Nonsense, my boy," the Major said. "All I did tonight was cast a little more bread on the waters and it would be foolish to leave before we found it again. But if it bothers you, reflect on this: it will be Monday morning—two days from now—before friend Swope can present that check at any bank and several days more before it clears to the bank it's drawn on. Surely that should give us ample grace period to do what we have to do and leave—even if, as you assume, the check is no good."

"Well, maybe," I admitted.

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The Major slapped my shoulder heartily. "Of course it does," he said. "Now have a good sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

Actually, they looked worse. Because when I stopped by the Major's room on my way to breakfast, he was gone and his bed hadn't been slept in.

It took about a minute for the realization to sink in. Then I spent another minute swearing silently at him before settling down to figure out what to do. Instinct told me to cut out, too. Because even if technically only the Major stood to fall on the bad-check charge, small town justice has the regrettable tendency to overlook technicalities and settle for the bird in hand. And if they wanted a peg to hang a case on, there was the small matter of a hotel bill I couldn't pay.

Unfortunately, getting out of town wasn't going to be that easy. The Major had taken the car and hitchhiking meant at least a ten-mile walk down to the main highway since rural drivers are understandably skittish about picking up strangers in city clothes.

Of course, there are worse things than walking ten miles, and going to jail is one of them. But I felt I still had some grace period left. And when some unobtrusive checking around revealed that there was a bus at four that afternoon I opted for it, figuring I could slip on board just before it pulled out and be on my way before anybody realized what had happened.

What I failed to take into account, though, was just how fast and efficiently news spreads in small towns. Swope and Mitchell cornered me a half hour before the bus was due to leave. Mitchell had changed into his working clothes. And despite his farmerish appearance and willingness to break the laws against gambling, it turned out he was a deputy sheriff.

"Haven't seen much of your friend, the Major, today," Swope said conversationally.

"As a matter of fact," Mitchell put in more bluntly, "we haven't seen him at all."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "He said he was tired and was going to stick pretty close to his room."

"Now that's strange," Swope said, "because he isn't there now. And the chambermaid told the desk clerk the room looked as if not a thing had been touched."

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"Well," I said, searching for something to say, "you know how it is with these military types. They spend so much time getting ready for inspection they forget how not to be neat."

"Perhaps," Swope said, "But his—shall we say, unavailability—does raise some questions. Particularly since I had our local banker call a banker friend of his in Detroit and neither one of them had ever heard of the bank your friend's check is drawn on."

"Now, look," I said. "That check is a matter strictly between you and the Major."

"It certainly is," a familiar clipped voice said, bringing all heads swiveling around.

The Major glowered from the doorway, hands locked behind his back and his barrel chest thrust out. "What's this all about, Swope?" he said.

"Just a little misunderstanding, Major," Swope said coolly.

"Hmph," the Major sniffed. "It seems to me that gentlemen don't misunderstand each other this way."

"Perhaps not," Swope agreed. "But then how would either of us know?" He moved to the door, followed by Mitchell. "Same time tonight?"

"Of course," the Major said stiffly, stepping aside to let them pass. "Cheeky buzzards," he added in a mild, almost disinterested voice after they had disappeared down the hall.

"Maybe I'm one, too," I said. "Because I sure would like to know where you disappeared to today."

The Major's face brightened into a smile. "Just following the Good Book again, my boy," he said. "And now if you'll excuse me I'd better get some rest if I'm to be at my best tonight."

The same players as before were waiting for us at Swope's house that evening. No one made any reference to the events of that afternoon. But, whether for effect, or not, Mitchell had left on his deputy sheriff's uniform. The only thing lacking was for him to place his gun meaningfully on the table beside his cards.

"Seven-card stud still all right, Major?" Swope said as the Major took his seat.

"It's your game," the Major said. "I do have one suggestion, though. Since I'm the big loser, how about giving me a chance to catch up by extending the no-limit period to an hour or two? Or even," he added a shade too casually, "to the whole game?"

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Forbus and Mitchell both looked at Swope, who let the moment drag out before shaking his head. "No," he said. "A rule's a rule. And as you said yourself, 'When in Rome—' "

"Do as the Romans," the Major finished. "Of course."

But it was apparent from the way he fidgeted in his seat and slapped his cards down that he was straining at the leash, impatient for the real game to begin. It wasn't long before Forbus began to fidget, too, and even Mitchell began to show signs of nervousness. Only Swope appeared unaffected, accepting his cards and playing them as unperturbedly as ever.

As for myself—well, I'd thought time had passed slowly in jail. But those days were sprints compared with tonight. And it was with a real sense of relief that I heard Swope announce: "Well, Major, half an hour to go. Now's your chance to get even—if you can."

As before, the game narrowed down immediately to Swope and the Major, and the cards and chips passed back and forth between them with such rapidity that it was impossible to keep track of who was winning. Still, when the dust settled at midnight, the Major was ahead.

"$800, I make it," he said, tallying his chips.

"So do I," Swope said equably, "and since you said you wanted a chance to win your check back, I saved it for you." He reached in his pocket and threw the now folded and crumpled check on the table between them. "I'll take my change in cash if you don't mind," he said. "$125, *I* make that."

He permitted himself a sly smile, and Forbus and Mitchell both grinned openly. The Major looked at them blankly for a moment. Then he smiled, although a bit wryly. "I have to hand it to you, Swope," he said. "You're a hard man to get the better of."

"I try to be," Swope said drily. He flicked his thumb rapidly over his fingers. "Now I'll take my money, please."

"Of course," the Major said. He counted $125 out of his wallet, passed it over to Swope, then picked up the deck of cards and regarded it with the wry expression still on his face. "Perhaps from now on I should stick to parlor tricks." He grinned suddenly, fanned the deck, and offered it to Swope. "Go ahead," he said, "Pick a card."

Swope hesitated, then selected a card, showed it to Forbus, Mitchell and me, and put it back in the deck for the Major. The Major cut and recut swiftly, then began dealing cards, laying

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them out in neat rows. When he'd got about halfway through the deck, he stopped, his thumb just flicking up the edge of the top remaining card. "One last fling, Swope," he said. "My next half-year's income against your next half-year's fees of office that the next card I turn over is yours."

I started to open my mouth, because Swope's card—the four of Spades—lay about a third of the way back in the rows of cards already face up! But a heavy look from Mitchell killed whatever I had planned to say.

Swope's face was as impassive as ever. "You have a bet," he said.

Smiling faintly, the Major reached out and turned the four of Spades face down!

There was a moment of silence. Then Mitchell guffawed and slapped Swope hard across the shoulders. "By God, Byron, he took you that time," he said.

"So he did," Swope said mildly. His eyes came up to the Major's. "That was clever," he said. "Deliberately going past the card you knew was mine. It lured me into overlooking the first rule of gambling—never bet on another man's game.

"Still, maybe you haven't won as much as you thought. I make my living from law and real estate. I only took that job as deputy clerk and recorder for the political weight it carries. That $20 I got from you was the first fee I've collected in six months and the last I'm likely to collect in as many—unless, of course, you manage to find someone foolish enough to buy that worthless land your friend James inherited, in which case you'll be more than welcome to the $20 that sale will bring." And with that he laughed nastily. So did Forbus and Mitchell. They were still laughing when the Major and I let ourselves out.

"Satisfied now, Major?" I said after the door had closed behind us.

"Very much so," he said.

"Then let's get out of this town while we still have money to buy gas."

"Nonsense, my boy," the Major said. "It would be foolish to leave now when we're just about to find again the bread we've cast upon the waters." He took my arm and marched me along beside him. "Old Swope was right about one thing," he said. "You *can't* sell that land of yours. But you *can* give it away. Which, as your agent, is just what I proceeded to arrange for this afternoon.

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"First thing Monday morning a reliable direct-mail firm in Detroit will begin releasing letters notifying the lucky 3000—selected at random from the telephone directories maintained at the excellent public library there—that they have each won a quarter of acre of land 'in the heart of Michigan's vacationland.' All that's required to confirm the price is that the lucky winner record the deed and pay the standard $20 fee before the end of the month.

"Naturally, I wouldn't expect too many to be able to come up and do that in person. So a convenient return envelope will be enclosed. And all we have to do as the letters come in is simply extract the money and pass the work on to Swope." He smiled benignly. "If experience is any guide, we can expect about fifty percent to respond, giving us a gross of $20 times 1500, or $30,000. Which isn't a bad return at all."

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Henry Slesar

The Memory Expert

Olin Mearns never forgot a face or a name. He knew the Capitals of the World, all the Vice-Presidents, how many years Ty Cobb hit over .300, the average yearly rainfall in Venezuela—you name it, Olin knew it. And then, at the lowest point in his mnemonic career, a shifty-eyed man with a scar on his chin enrolled in Olin's memory course. . .

Olin Mearns sat alone in the makeshift classroom above the El Greco Restaurant and buried his face in his hands. He knew he would never forget this day. But that wasn't unusual. Olin's profession was remembering things and instructing others in that serviceable art. He was a Memory teacher, and in good times his class in the Britt Building on 42nd Street numbered between 20 and 30 students a semester. He could put a name to every face in less than ten minutes after the course began, a feat which never failed to impress his pupils.

Of course, the trick was much easier to perform these days, since Olin's classes never boasted more than five or six students, a practical reality that had forced him to abandon his 42nd Street address for smaller quarters above the Greek restaurant downtown. (The most memorable thing about his course was the smell of burning olive oil.) One of those few students had been Penelope Walz, the cause of his current misery. She had just turned 24 (today) and had a face that Olin couldn't forget even if he tried. She had an hourglass figure, although perhaps a little plump around the six o'clock mark. She also had a mind like a sieve.

It was this latter feature that had attracted Penelope to the small advertisement Olin ran regularly in the *Daily News:*

"Never forget another face! Never forget another name! Never forget another fact that may be vital to your business or social success! In just four short weeks Olin Mearns, Ph.D., will help you develop a Perfect Memory!"

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Only that morning Penelope's imperfect memory had cost her the fourth secretarial job that year. She worked for a lawyer named Nerdlinger, but rarely remembered his name. That day Mr. Nerdlinger himself had walked into the office and Penelope had said, "May I help you?" She had been there four months. When she left she even forgot to take her salary check.

The truth is, Olin had failed to do much for Penelope's mnemonic powers. Their encounter was memorable for a different reason. Olin had fallen passionately, hopelessly in love for the first time in his 49 years. Penelope was flattered enough to respond, despite the difference in their ages, the sparseness of Olin's physique, and the fact that his hair was only a memory. It was his brain that impressed her, that vast storehouse of facts that reposed inside his naked dome.

But there was something very different about Penelope's attitude when he arrived with her birthday gift that afternoon.

"What's wrong, sweetness?" Olin said. "Don't you like the roses?"

"Half a dozen," Penelope said sourly. "Imagine bringing anybody half a dozen roses!"

"Sugar, I told you that I have to cut expenses."

"*You* have to cut!" Penelope cried. "What about me? Do you know they're raising the rent on this apartment by thirty dollars a month? Do you know how much money I owe the grocery store? What about the loan you were going to make me?"

Olin swallowed hard, wishing there were things Penelope *didn't* remember.

"Honey, sweetheart, you know how rough business has been lately. I haven't enrolled *one* student yet this term—"

"And the ring you were going to buy me?" she accused. "Whatever happened to *that?* Honestly, Olin, for a memory teacher you have a very short memory sometimes!"

"Sweetness, I'm waiting until things pick up. It's the economy, people think education is a luxury these days—"

"I don't know about luxuries," Penelope said icily. "All I know is that I'm not getting any younger. And that's why I've decided to take that job whosit offered me, with the whatsit company."

Olin gasped. "Honey, baby, you don't mean that job in Alaska? What do you want to freeze up there for?"

"Whosit said it isn't really cold, not in you-know—"

"Juneau," Olin said. He tried to put his arm around the middle

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of the hourglass and winced when she pushed him away.

"I'm sorry," Penelope said firmly. "A girl has to think of her future, Olin, and you don't seem to have any."

Sitting alone now in the empty classroom, Olin heard an echo of that statement in his head. It became part of his memory bank, along with the Capitals of the World, the Hall of Fame Pitching and Batting Records, and all the other facts that now seemed useless and trivial to him.

When the doorbell sounded, he wasn't stirred into action until the third ring. But habit was stronger than sorrow, and when he opened the door and saw the face of the man outside, he took a mental photograph of his features. The beetling brows, the square chin cleft unnaturally by a scar, the thin lips, the yellowish eyes, shifty with suspicion. And with the same sense of triumph he always felt on these occasions, Olin Mearns realized he could actually put a name to this stranger's face. He wasn't quite sure why, but he knew his name was Morgan Krebs.

"Mike Kingston," the man said, baffling Olin. "I called you this morning, Mr. Mearns, remember?"

"Oh," Olin said. "Oh, yes, of course, Mr. — Kingston. Please come in."

The man entered and seemed relieved to have the door shut behind him.

"I read your ad," he said. "About the Memory course?"

"Ah," Olin answered vaguely, still puzzled by the mystery. He never forgot a face, or the name that went with it. Was he losing his grip, in addition to his girl and his career? But then, as Kingston refused the chair he was offered and wandered toward the window, Olin had the answer. Kingston was using an alias, and no wonder. The name "Morgan Krebs" had appeared under a picture of his face (two views) on Wanted posters and in newspaper stories.

"The thing is," Kingston was saying, "I don't want to take the whole course. I don't have the time, you know?"

"Well—er, what did you have in mind then?" Olin asked.

"What I really need is to remember just one thing," Kingston said. He glanced sideways out of the window toward the street. Whether he thought he was being followed or it was simply force of habit, Olin couldn't tell.

"Just one thing," Olin repeated. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Understand? I forgot something, and I haven't been able to

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remember it since, and it bothers me. I mean, like it bothers me a lot. I figured a guy who knows about Memory, he ought to know how to make me remember. Am I wrong or what?"

The man made Olin nervous, but he was the closest thing to a live pupil Olin had seen in weeks.

"Well," he said carefully, "I'm not sure you understand my course, Mr. Krebston."

"Kingston."

"Kingston, yes. You see, what I do is treach people how to develop their memories, how to use the processes of association, correlation, assimilation." The man's face was like a blank white sheet. Olin finished lamely, "Maybe if you told me more about this. . ."

"All right," Krebs said. "You see, a couple of days ago I stored some, er, personal belongings in one of them new lockers in the railway station, you know? One of the lockers that works without a key. It's one of them combination-lock lockers, you know?"

Olin nodded, fascinated by the man's nervous manner and his shifting eyes.

"Well, that was a dumb thing, you know, on account of I went and forgot the number. I mean, I had a ticket with the locker number and the combination, but I lost it when things got hot. The weather, I mean," he said quickly. "I mean, changing into a summer suit, you know?" Olin was still nodding. "I keep trying to remember them numbers, I mean, I'm going crazy trying to remember them, it's important. You see?"

Olin said, "Well, perhaps if you spoke to someone, an official of the railroad, or the company that makes the lockers—"

"Forget it," Kingston said flatly, ignoring Olin's profession. "That's one thing I can't do, never mind why. I got to remember them numbers, and I got to get them, er, personal belongings out of the locker. So what I want you to do, Professor, is help me remember it, dig?"

Olin dug only too well. Obviously Mr. Morgan Krebs placed quite a value on the, er, personal belongings.

"Well, it's unusual," he said. "I mean, I'm not sure that my particular techniques can *prod* memory as well as improve it."

Krebs, who had his hand on the window shade, flapped it with an impatient gesture.

"Can you help me or not?"

"I might, I might," Olin said hastily. "I mean, the basic princi-

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ples should be the same. But I'm not sure I can succeed."

"I'll pay you whether it works or not," Krebs said. "Either way I'll pay you the full price of your course. That's a hundred and fifty bucks, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll pay you a big one and a half, just for trying. And if you make me remember them numbers, Professor, there'll be a bonus in it for you. I mean, a real nice bonus."

Olin seemed to be considering the proposition. Actually he had already agreed to say yes.

"Yes," he said finally. "All I can do is try."

He told Krebs to return the next morning, when the private tutoring would begin.

The moment his new pupil left, Olin dived for the telephone.

"Penelope?" he said. "I've got to see you. There's something I have to tell you."

"The names of all the Presidents and Vice-Presidents? I'm not interested, thank you."

"You don't understand. Something has happened that may be very important—"

"I'm going to bed," Penelope told him. "I've got to get up early. I'm meeting Mr. Whosit about the whatchamacallit. The job. In Alaska."

"Just give me a little time," he pleaded. "Just a few more days."

"Forget about me," she said. "I've already forgotten about you, Harlan."

"Olin," he said miserably, and heard the hanging-up click in the receiver.

When Krebs arrived the next morning, promptly at the appointed time, he didn't seem aware of the fact that his instructor had slept only two hours the night before, spending the rest of his normal sleeping time scanning books, most of which he had already committed to memory. But Olin had failed to find any foolproof system for dredging up already forgotten facts.

He'd just have to wing it.

"We'll try the technique called association," he told his pupil. "Every memory has association with other memories, and if we can put one together with the other—"

"Whatever you say, Professor."

"Try to tell me what you were doing on the day you put this, er, personal property into the locker."

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"I don't remember."

"Do you recall what you were *thinking* when you put this, er, property away?"

"Never mind what I was thinking," Krebs said coldly. "Just tell me how to remember them numbers."

"All right. Shut your eyes and visualize yourself placing the, er, property in the locker." Kingston closed his eyes. "What do you see?"

"Nothing. It's too dark."

"Can you see the shape of the, er, thing you're placing in the locker?"

"Yeah, I remember the shape of it. It's a little black suitc—" His eyes flew open. "Never mind the shape of it, Professor. I know the shape of it. What I want to know is, *where* is it?"

"Can you recall even *one* of the digits?"

"What's a digit?"

"Can you remember even *one* of the numbers? A zero, one, two, three, or four?"

"Yeah," Kingston said.

"Which one, which one?" Olin said excitedly. "Can you remember which of those it was?"

"It was either a zero, a one, a two, a three, or a four. Only I don't remember whether it came first, second, third, or last."

Olin leaned back with a sigh.

That night he telephoned Penelope again.

She said, "Whom did you say is calling?"

The next day, Olin told his pupil, "Today we're going to try a word association test. Although I guess I mean a number association test."

Without much hope for success he began reading off a long list of four-digit combinations. To each of them Kingston either grunted "No" or merely shrugged. Eventually, after two hours of this, the student grew so tired he stretched out on Olin's sofa and shut his eyes.

"9918," Olin said, his voice hoarse.

Kingston didn't reply. He was asleep.

That night, instead of phoning Penelope, he went to her apartment. He found her in the midst of packing.

"Go away, Nolan," she said. "I'm leaving this weekend. Mr. Hammerschmidt is picking me up Saturday morning."

"Who?" Olin said, feeling a pang of jealousy at hearing the

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name of her new employer for the first time.

"Mr. Hammerschmidt," Penelope said. "He's in the pharmaceutical business."

"A druggist?"

"He's not a druggist. He's opening a whole chain of drug stores in Alaska and I'm going to be his personal secretary." She softened when she saw Olin's mournful reaction. "I'm sorry, I really am. But I told you I had to think of my future, remember?"

"I remember," Olin said, without pride.

The next day he took Krebs on a field trip. They went to the railway terminal together and tried to recreate the circumstances. Krebs warned Olin that he had attempted the same procedure on his own, wandering past the banks of lockers for hours on end, always to no avail.

Olin's encouragement didn't help. Krebs simply couldn't remember.

It began to look hopeless.

That night, skimming through treatises on memory that he had previously thought worthless or impractical, Olin felt the greatest sense of discouragement he had ever known.

Then Sigmund Freud helped him out.

He had never attempted to analyze the *reasons* behind Krebs's forgetfulness. But rereading Freud and his works on the theory of the unconscious, he suddenly became aware that Morgan Krebs felt *guilty* about whatever it was he had hidden away. That was it! He didn't *want* to remember the number.

But how was he to break the barrier Krebs had erected? Olin wasn't an analyst. He couldn't hypnotize Krebs into loosening his hold on the truth. What would make him cooperate?

Then it dawned on him.

Drugs!

When Penelope heard what he had in mind, she gasped.

"Olin, I couldn't do such a thing!"

"You could do anything if you tried," Olin said, stroking her arm. "All you have to do is remember the name. Sodium pentathol. You don't even have to remember it—I'll write it down for you, honey sweetheart. And you can tell your nice friend Mr. Hammerschmidt that you absolutely *have* to have some of it or you can't possibly go to Alaska with him."

"But what are you going to *do* with it?"

"I'm going to *help* Mr. Krebs, sugar, I'm going to help my

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patient—I mean my pupil—remember something very, very important. And when he does, it's going to make all the difference in the world to you and me."

"I don't see how," Penelope said. But he could see she was wavering.

Penelope had surprisingly little trouble obtaining the drug from Mr. Hammerschmidt. Obviously, the threat of going to cold Alaska without her warm hourglass body was enough to make him produce the drug without asking too many questions.

On Friday morning, the day before her scheduled flight to Juneau, Olin called her from his office and told her to stand by for exciting developments.

When Krebs entered his office and learned what the Professor had in mind, he blanched.

"I don't like needles!" he said bluntly.

"You needn't worry," Olin said. "I was a medical corpsman in the army. I gave thousands of shots, and I never lost a patient." He gave Krebs a toothy smile meant to be reassuring.

Krebs resisted for another fifteen minutes, but then, spurred on by Olin's promises of immediate results, finally relented.

Olin gave him the injection.

He had never administered a "truth serum" before, but he had seen enough movies to know that he was supposed to ask his subject to start counting backward from 100. Krebs scowled and said, "Nah," and promptly fell asleep.

For a moment Olin thought his plan had failed, but then Krebs stirred and said, "I didn't do it, officer."

Olin leaned over the sofa and said, "Mr. Kingston, listen to me." He got a snore for a response. "Morgan!" he said loudly. "Morgan Krebs! Listen to me!"

"Yeah, what is it?" his pupil said testily. "What do you want?"

"I want you to remember something, Morgan Krebs! I want you to remember the day you walked into the railroad station carrying a small black suitcase! Do you remember it?"

"So what?" Krebs said with hostility, his eyes still closed.

"You *do* remember it, don't you, Morgan?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"You knew you had to get rid of that suitcase, didn't you, Morgan? You knew the police were closing in on you!"

"Dirty stoolie pigs!" Morgan shouted, kicking his legs against the arm of the sofa.

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"You went to the lockers, didn't you, Morgan? You picked out a locker, and you put the money into the slot, and you placed the little suitcase inside. Is that right?"

"Yeah. I had to get rid of it. They were after me!"

"You took the ticket, didn't you, Morgan? What did you do with the ticket? Did you throw it away so the cops couldn't find it?"

"Yeah!"

"That means you committed the ticket numbers to memory, is that right? You thought you could remember those numbers without any trouble, didn't you?"

"Yeah! Anybody can remember a few numbers!"

"Of course you can, Morgan! In fact, you can remember it right now!"

"No—I can't!"

"You *can*," Olin said, licking his dry lips. "All you have to do is look at the ticket—look at the ticket in your mind!—and you can see those numbers plain as day. Can't you, Morgan? Plain as day!"

Krebs's face was getting wet. There were beads of sweat in the scar on his chin.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. Plain as day!"

Olin began sweating himself.

"You see them, Morgan? You *see* the numbers?"

"Yeah, I see them!"

"What are they? What are the numbers?"

A smile was softening Krebs's thin lips.

"Five, zero, one, one," he said dreamily. His whole body seemed to relax. "Locker number five, zero, one, one, combination number two, two, five."

A great sense of peace seemed to descend over the man on the sofa. He was so content he drifted off to sleep again. But his contentment couldn't match Olin Mearns's sense of triumph. In fact, Olin was so elated he decided to telephone Penelope Walz right then and there, with Kingston snoring smilingly on his sofa.

"You're not going to Alaska, sugar baby," he said. "You're going to Palm Beach, Florida, where it's nice and warm. You're going to lie in the sun with your Olin and turn brown as a little berry."

"Florida!" Penelope said. "Oh, Marlon, wouldn't that be wonderful! But how can you afford it?"

"Pack your bags again," he chuckled. "Only this time pack for warm weather, sweetness."

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An hour later Krebs woke and sat up. "What happened?" he said groggily. "What happened, Professor?"

Olin looked at him sadly and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kingston. The sodium pentathol was my last resort, and I'm afraid it failed."

"You couldn't make me remember them numbers?"

"No," Olin said. "It just didn't work. But I have one good piece of news for you."

"What's that?"

"I'm only charging you half the fee," Olin said smugly. "I feel it's only right."

Krebs's burly shoulders slumped so far down he looked almost puny.

Olin waited for an hour after Krebs left the office. He was in no hurry. He didn't even bother to write the numbers down. He knew he could trust his memory. He always had. Once again he felt pride in his ability, confidence in the future.

The police found Penelope's name and address in Olin Mearns's pocket notebook, which explained why they called on her that night.

"But I don't understand," she whimpered. "How could anything like that happen to Olin?"

"We thought maybe you could explain it, Miss Walz. What made him open that locker? And when he did, why did he take that bag out of it? Do you know?"

"It wasn't *his* locker," Penelope sobbed. "It belonged to a pupil of his—a man named Tibbs. No, sounded more like Crabs."

"Krebs? Morgan Krebs?"

"That was the name. What was in that suitcase, anyway?"

"Something Krebs didn't want any inspector to find when he opened the locker. Usually he left those little beauties in telephone company offices, after hours. He's got a hate on the phone company, but he never wanted to *kill* anyone."

"Kill anyone? You mean he was a *killer*?"

"Too bad your friend didn't remember who Krebs really was. If he had he wouldn't be pasted all over the terminal now. He should have remembered what the newspapers called Morgan Krebs."

"What was that?"

"The Mad Bomber of the Bronx."

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Michael Innes

A Question of Confidence

Sir John Appleby (the "policeman retired") is brought a fascinating case: the murder of Dr. Robert Durham, Master and "head man" at Oxford University. . .Now, it isn't often that we can present a school mystery, especially one on so high a level of academe, and as Vincent Starrett was perhaps the first to point out, academic mysteries are unfailingly interesting. . .A contemporary example of the leisurely, low-key English detective story. . .

Detective: SIR JOHN APPLEBY

Bobby Appleby (successful scrum-half retired, and author of that notable anti-novel, *The Lumber Room)* had been down from Oxford for a couple of years. But he went back from time to time, sometimes for the day and sometimes on a weekend basis. He had a number of clever friends there who were now busily engaged in digging in for life. They had become, that is to say, junior dons of one or another more or less probationary sort, and had thereby risen from the austerities of undergraduate living to the fleshpots and the thrice-driven beds of down associated with Senior Common Rooms and High Tables. They liked entertaining Bobby, to whom *The Lumber Room* rather than his athletic prowess lent, in their circle, a certain prestige. One of these youths was a historian called Brian Button.

Button sometimes came home with Bobby to Long Dream. Sir John Appleby (policeman retired) rather liked this acquaintance of his son's, and was even accustomed to address him as B.B.—this seemingly with some elderly facetious reference to the deceased art historian Bernhard Berenson. Bobby's B.B. (unlike the real B.B) came from Yorkshire, a region of which Bobby's father approved.

So Appleby was quite pleased when, chancing to look up from

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his writing table on a sunny Saturday morning, he saw Bobby's ancient Porsche stationary on the drive, with Bobby climbing out of the driver's seat and B.B. out of the other. But the young men were unprovided with suitcases, which was odd.

The young men bolted for the front door as if through a thunderstorm, which was odder still. And seconds later—what was oddest of all—the young men burst without ceremony into the room.

"Daddy!" the distinguished young novelist exclaimed, and he seemed positively out of breath, "here's an awful thing happened. Brian's got mixed up in a murder."

"Both of you sit down." Appleby looked with considerably more interest at Mr. Button than at his son. B.B. too was out of breath. But B.B. was also as pale as death. The lad, Appleby said to himself, is clean out of his comfortable academic depth. "And might it be described," Appleby asked aloud, "as a particularly gruesome murder?"

"Moderately," Bobby replied judiciously. "You see—"

"In Oxford?"

"Yes, of course. We've driven straight over. And you've damn well got to come and clear it up."

"But, Bobby, it isn't my business to clear up homicides in Oxford, not even in the interest of B.B. Of course, I can be told about it."

"Well, it seems to have been like this—"

"By B.B. himself, please. It will do him good. So do fetch us drinks, and, Brian, you go ahead."

"Thank you, sir, thank you very much." Mr. Button clearly liked being called Brian for a change; it braced him. "Perhaps you know the job I've been given. It's ordering and cataloguing the Cannongate Papers."

"The Third Marquis' stuff?"

"Yes. I'm the Cannongate Lecturer."

"You lecture on the Papers?"

"Of course not." B.B. found this a foolish question. "That's just what I'm called, since I've got to be called something. I get the whole bloody archive in order, and then it's to be edited and published in a grand way, and I shall be Number Two on the job. Quite a thing for me."

"I'm delighted to hear it. Go on."

"All Lord Cannongate's papers have been deposited with the

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college by the trustees. Masses and masses of them—and some of them as confidential as hell."

"State papers, you mean?"

"Well, yes—but that's not exactly the rub. There's a certain amount of purely personal and family stuff. It hasn't been sieved out. I have to segregate it and lock it up. It has nothing to do with what can ever be published."

"Then the trustees ought to have done the job themselves."

"I couldn't agree more. But they're lazy as hell, so the responsibility has come to me. It's a question of confidence. If there's a leak, what follows is a complete shambles so far as my career's concerned."

"I see." Appleby looked with sympathy at this agitated young man. "But something has been said about murder? That sounds rather a different order of things."

"Yes, of course." B.B. passed a hand across his brow. "A sense of proportion, and all that. I must try to get it right." B.B. took a big breath and began to tell his story.

He worked, it seemed, in a kind of commodious dungeon beneath the college library. The cavernous chamber was impregnable; so, within it, were the numerous steel file cabinets in which the Cannongate Papers had arrived. B.B., coming and going, had only to deal faithfully with locks and keys, and nothing could go wrong.

Unfortunately it is not easy, living in a residential university, to bear constantly in mind that the world is inhabited by others as well as scholars and gentlemen, ancient faithful menservants of a quasi-hereditary sort, a few pretty secretaries, and an excellent chef. One may differ sharply from one's colleagues over such issues as the problem of the historical Socrates; one may even be conscious that at times quite naked and shocking animosities can generate themselves out of less learned matters—as, for example, where to hang a picture or who shall look after the wine; but one doesn't—one simply doesn't—expect to have one's pocket picked or one's researchers plagiarized.

The concept of the felonious, in short, is one to which it is difficult to give serious thought.

These considerations—or something like them—B.B. did divulge as the early stages of his narrative now unfolded. He had not always been too careful about those bloody keys, and he would look a pretty fool in a witness box if this ghastly affair had the

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consequence of depositing him in one before a judge and jury.

Appleby's benevolent reception of the troubles of Bobby's friend didn't stand up to all this too well. He had a simple professional persuasion that keys exist to be turned in locks without fail at appropriate times, and that a young man who has gone vague on instructions he has received and accepted in such a matter ought not to be let off being told that he has been improperly negligent. On the other hand, it was possible that B.B. was himself feeling very bad indeed. These were considerations that required balanced utterance.

"I hope," Appleby said, "that we needn't conclude your culpable carelessness over these things to have been the direct occasion of somebody's getting murdered. It sounds inherently improbable. But go on."

"Well, sir, there's rather a difficult one there." B.B. was recovering from the extreme disarray in which he had arrived at Dream. "I suppose the original chunk of dirty work—a bit of thieving—couldn't have happened if I'd always been right on the ball over those rotten keys. But the murder's a different matter. That seems to have been the result of my having, as a matter of fact, a brighter moment."

"Brian saw the significance of the electricity." Bobby Appleby, who had returned to his father's study deftly carrying a decanter, three glasses, and a plate of chocolate biscuits, offered this luminous remark. "Absolutely top-detective stuff, if you ask me."

"But I don't ask you. So just pour us that sherry and be quiet." Appleby turned back to Mr. Button. "More about your brighter moment, please."

"When I happen on any paper dealing with a certain delicate and purely family matter, I have instructions to photocopy it. There's some prospect of a law suit, it seems, over whether a grandson of *my* Lord Cannongate was of legitimate birth or not, and a sort of dossier has to be got together for some solicitors."

"You have to make only one copy?"

"Yes, and when I came on something relevant earlier this week I did just that. We have a machine on which we can do the job ourselves, you see, in one of the college offices. There were eight pages of the stuff, and when I'd made a copy I filed the eight sheets of it away in a special box with other photocopies of similar material. That was on Monday. Yesterday morning I had to go to that box again, and I happened to turn over those particular

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copies. Only, the sheets were pretty well stuck to each other still. So you see."

"No, Brian, I *don't* see," Appleby glanced from the Cannongate Lecturer to the creator of *The Lumber Room,* who was punishing the chocolate biscuits rather more heavily than the sherry. He might have been wondering whether England was exclusively populated by excessively clever young men. "Why should they be stuck to each other?"

"Because of what Bobby says—the electricity." B.B. seemed surprised that this had not been immediately apparent. "Those photocopying machines are uncommonly lavish with it. Static electricity, I think it's called. If you stack your copies one on top of another as they come out of the contraption, they cling to one another like—"

"Like characters in a skin flick." Bobby had momentarily stopped munching to offer this helpful simile. "And that's what Brian found."

"I see." Appleby was no longer mystified. "The electrical phenomenon fades, and therefore the sheets manifesting it yesterday could not be those which you had filed away on Monday. Earlier yesterday, or just a little before that, somebody had extracted your copies from their box, photocopied them in turn, and then—inadvertently, perhaps—returned to the box not the older copies but the newer ones. And but for this curious electrical or magnetic effect on the paper, and but for your being alert enough to notice it and draw the necessary inference, nobody would ever have known there had been any monkey business at all."

"That's it, sir. And, if I may say so, pretty hot of you to get there in one."

"Thank you very much," Appleby said a shade grimly. "It doesn't exactly tax the intellect. And just what did you do, Brian, when you made this unfortunate discovery?"

"I went straight to our Master, Robert Durham, and told him the whole thing. There was nothing else for it but to confess to the head man."

"That was thoroughly sensible of you." Appleby spoke as a man mollified. "And how has the Master taken it?"

"How *did* he take it," Bobby corrected, and reached for another biscuit.

"*What?*" Appleby looked from one to the other young man aghast. "Brian—?"

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"Yes, sir. You see, the Master seemed to have ideas about what had happened, although he didn't tell me what they were. It appeared to ring a bell. And that must be why they've murdered him."

"Good God!" Appleby had a passing acquaintance with the scholar thus summarily disposed of.

"We could have better spared a better man." Bobby offered this improving quotation with some solemnity. "Of course, the old boy had had his life. I did feel that. He must have been sixty, if he was a day. He'd toasted his bottom before the fire of life. It sank—"

"Possibly so." Appleby made no attempt to find this out-of-turn mortuary humor diverting, but he did perhaps judge it, from Bobby, a shade mysterious.

"Still," Bobby went on, "even if the Master was a clever case for euthanasia, the thing must be cleared up. *You* must come and clear it up, as I've said. The fact is, they may be getting round to imagining things."

"Who do you mean by 'they'? B.B. seems to be applying the word to a gang of assassins."

"What *I* mean is the police." Bobby Appleby was suddenly speaking slowly and carefully. "They may pitch on some quite unsuitable suspect. For instance, on B.B. himself. You see, there are one or two things you haven't yet heard."

"To my confusion, Bobby means." Mr. Button, who had cheered up while reporting his acumen over the electrified photocopies, was again sunk in gloom, and he had blurted this out after a short expressive silence. "I think the police believe I took the Master a cock-and-bull story, just as a coverup for something else. I think they believe the Master spotted my deception, and that I killed him because otherwise I'd have been turfed out in disgrace and it would have been the end of me."

"That's a succinct statement, at least." Appleby was looking at his son's friend gravely. "Does it mean that, in addition to being careless with those keys, you had been at fault in some other way as well?"

"I'm afraid it does. You see, I'd had the idea of writing a few popular articles on the side."

"My dear young man! You were going to publicize this Cannongate family scandal you've been talking about?"

"Of course not!" B.B. had flushed darkly. "Just some purely

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political things. I'd have got permission, and all that, from the trustees. But I felt I wanted to have a definite proposal to put to them. So I had a newspaper chap up from London several times and showed him this and that. It was a bit irregular, I suppose. It could have looked bad. As a matter of fact, our senior History Tutor came on us a couple of times and didn't seem to like it. I expect he has told the pigs."

"As it had undoubtedly now become his duty to do." Appleby wasn't pleased by this manner of referring to the police. "But this London contact of yours could at least substantiate your comparatively blameless intentions?"

"I suppose so."

"On the other hand, if this journalist is an unscrupulous person, might he have come back into the college and done this thieving and copying himself? Had you told him about those more intimate papers? Even shown them to him?"

"Not shown them. And only mentioned them in a general way. A bit of talk over a pint. He may have gathered where they were kept."

"Could he, a stranger, have got at the photocopying machine?"

"Well, yes, in theory. I took him in there and copied something trivial for him—just to show him we're quite up to date. It's all a bit unfortunate."

"I agree. And is there anything else that's unfortunate? For example, have you done any other indiscreet talking about this scandal part in the Cannongate Papers?"

"No, of course not. Or only to Bruno."

"Very well, B.B. Tell me about Bruno."

"Bruno Bone is our English Tutor, although he's pretty well just a contemporary of Bobby and me. Teaches Wordsworth and Coleridge and all that sort of stuff. But, really, he wants to be a novelist. More junk yards, so to speak." This impertinent glance at Bobby's masterpiece was accompanied by rather a joyless laugh on B.B.'s part. "I told Bruno one evening that there was a whole novel in those damned private papers."

"That was sheer nonsense, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid so. You know how it is, late at night and after some drinks. Talking for effect, and all that."

"But at least your brilliant conversation informed Mr. Bone that these scandalous papers do exist? Did he take any further interest in them?"

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"Well, yes. Bruno came in one morning and asked to have a dekko. He was a bit miffed when I told him it couldn't be done."

"Just how did you tell him?"

"Oh, I slapped the relevant box and said, 'Not for you, my boy.' "

"I see." Appleby gazed in some fascination at this unbelievably luckless youth. "Tell me, B.B. Of course there isn't the material for a novel in your wretched dossier. But might there be material for blackmail?"

"Definitely, I'd say. It's not all exactly past history, you know. There are people still alive—"

"All right, we needn't go into details yet. But tell me this: might the Master have got to know about your chatter to Bruno Bone?"

"It's not unlikely. Bruno's an idiot. Talks about anything to anybody."

"That's a habit I'm glad you disapprove of. Do you think Bruno could have developed some morbid and irrational curiosity as a result of all this, and have actually abstracted that particular bunch of papers and made copies of them?"

"I suppose it's possible. Those literary characters are wildly neurotic."

"And the Master might have found out—with the result that Bruno's own career would suddenly have been very much at risk?"

"Yes. The Master is—was—rather a dab at nosing things out."

"And that brings us to the last relevant point at the moment. Just how did Dr. Durham die?"

"Brains blown out." Bobby Appleby, who had finished the last chocolate biscuit, produced this robustly. "With some sort of revolver, it seems. Not something that Brian's likely to keep handy, I'd have thought."

"Nor Bruno," B.B. said handsomely.

"Nor any stray blackmailer, either." Appleby was frowning. "You wouldn't know whether the police are claiming to have found the weapon?"

"Oh, yes." Bobby nodded vigorously. "It was lying on the carpet in the Master's study."

"That's where I'd expect it to be." Appleby sounded faintly puzzled. "You know, the great majority of men who are found with their brains blown out have effected the messy job themselves. And even in the moment of death some spasm or convulsion can

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result in the weapon's landing yards away. So, just for the moment, this story of yours sounds to me something of a mare's nest. Robert Durham is in some pathological state of depression and suddenly makes away with himself. And then in comes Brian's bad conscience about his handling of his archive. Bobby, wouldn't you agree? You've said something that makes me think you would."

"Have I?" Bobby seemed not to make much of this. "Durham wasn't *my* Master, you know. He got the job only when mine died a couple of years ago. But I've seen enough of him to know that he was a rum bird."

"Secretive," B.B. added. "Nobody quite knew what he was up to. He was a bit remote. Brooding type. And a sick man, some said."

"God bless my soul!" As he made use of this antique expression, Sir John Appleby got to his feet. "Unless you're both leading me up the garden path, you're describing a thoroughly persuasive candidate for suicide. Not that such don't get murdered from time to time. They may ingeniously elect liquidation in one way or another, without so much as being conscious of the fact. Which is psychologically interesting, no doubt, but murder it nevertheless remains."

Appleby paused, and looked searchingly from one young man to the other. "Is there anything else I ought to know?"

"Not in the way of fact, I'd say." For the moment Bobby Appleby, so childishly addicted to chocolate biscuits, appeared to have taken charge of things. "Of course, the people who may have extra facts are the police. And they *do* have something. I don't know what, but I know it's there. I was present when they talked to Brian early this morning. They kept mum, but I knew they had *something*." Bobby grinned at his father. "Family instinct, perhaps. It's why I brought Brian over to Dream. You *can* take a hand?"

"I can stroll around the college and have a chat here and there. I'd tell the Chief Constable and he wouldn't mind a bit—always provided I was tactful with his men on the spot. And being *that* is one of the things I keep a grip on even in senescence."

Appleby, as he momentarily adopted this humorous vein, let his glance stray out the window. It fixed itself briefly, and then returned to the two young men. "I'll make a call or two," he said easily, and moved toward the door. "Drink up the sherry meanwhile—there's about a thimbleful left for each of you."

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With this Appleby left the room. But he was back before much in the way of telephone calls could have been achieved.

"We were talking about the police," he said gently. "As a matter of fact, they're here; and, Brian, they very probably have a warrant for your arrest."

"The personalities of the people concerned?" The Vice-Master, who was called Fordyce, looked at Appleby doubtfully. "That's not what the local police are asking. They want to know who had keys to what, and when who could have been where."

"Quite right. Absolutely essential." Appleby nodded approvingly. "It's what gets the results in nine cases out of ten. And, on this occasion, they appear to have got a result quite rapidly. Too rapidly, I think you'd say?"

"Of course I'd say. The notion of that young man Brian Button providing himself with a revolver and shooting the Master dead with it in his own study is simply too fantastic to stand up."

"But just at the moment, Vice-Master, it seems to be standing up rather well. The police have no doubt about what Dr. Durham was doing when he was shot, and it's what they've discovered that has led them to question our young man. Durham was dictating a letter on his tape recorder for his secretary to type out later. It was to the Cannongate trustees and said flatly that Button had been guilty of professional misconduct of so scandalous a sort that he must be dismissed at once—even though it meant that all academic employment would henceforth be closed to him."

"It was a very strange thing for the Master to write, Sir John."

"Well, there it is. The tape isn't to be denied. The Master appears to have flicked the switch that stops the machine simply because he was interrupted while on the job. So the record remained for the police to find."

"I understand the police case. Button has admitted going to see the Master early yesterday morning and telling him a story about rifled papers. It is not supposed that he returned again in the late-afternoon, armed and resolved. The Master told him of the step he proposed to take, but without saying that he had at that moment broken off from recording his letter. So Button killed him, hoping thus to smother up the whole thing. I repeat that it is utter nonsense, completely alien to Brian Button's character, such as it is. A somewhat irresponsible young man, perhaps. But not precisely bloody, bold, and resolute."

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"It's Durham's character that interests me more. And aren't you saying that he too seems to have behaved *out* of character?"

"In a sense that is so." Fordyce had taken this point soberly. "But perhaps I have to say that, although I knew Robert Durham long before he became Master, I never quite understood the man. I have sometimes thought of him as harboring that degree of inner instability which is liable to produce what they call a personality change. And yet that is a fantastic speculation."

"At least a change of job, one supposes, may bring out something roughly of that sort. Was there any particular regard in which he appeared to you to be changing?"

"I can scarcely answer that without appearing very much at sea, Sir John. In one aspect Durham was a man growing detached, remote, fatigued. In another he was becoming irascible, authoritarian, and increasingly prone to flashes of odd behavior. He could behave like an old-fashioned headmaster with a vindictive turn of mind."

"Dear me! That sort of thing surely doesn't cut much ice with undergraduates today?"

"Decidedly not. They can be a very great nuisance, our young men. But it is reason alone that is of any avail with them. It's something they have begun to get the hang of a little. Talk sense patiently enough and without condescension, and round they always come." Fordyce had delivered this high doctrine with an effect of sudden intellectual conviction. "Durham had lost grip on that."

"How did he get along with the younger dons?"

"Ah! Not too well."

"To the extent of anything like a feud? With Button himself, for instance?"

"With Button, I'd scarcely suppose so, although the lad may have annoyed him. Nor with any of them to what you might call a point of naked animosity. Bone might be an exception."

"Bone? A young man called Bruno Bone?"

"Yes. I'm not sure that Bone, for whatever reason, hadn't got to the point of hating Durham's guts." It was rather unexpectedly that the Vice-Master had produced this strong expression.

"But Bone, too, would scarcely be bloody, bold, and resolute?"

"Of course not. He—" the Vice-Master, who seemed to have produced this reply by rote, suddenly checked himself. "Do you know," he said, "that I wouldn't be quite confident of that? But

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then I'm beginning to wonder what I shall ever be robustly confident about again. This is an undermining affair, Sir John."

Bruno Bone, a lanky, prematurely bald young man, was spending his Saturday afternoon banging away on his typewriter. Perhaps he was writing a lecture, or perhaps he was writing a novel. Whichever it was, he didn't seem to care much for being interrupted by the mere father of the author of *The Lumber Room*. "Yes, of course I know they've arrested Button," Bone said. "So what?"

"I'd rather suppose you might be distressed or concerned. Not that they have, perhaps, quite arrested him. He's helping them with their inquiries. They have to tread carefully, you know. But it's true they hold a document from a magistrate. It's in reserve. But I'd simply like to ask, Mr. Bone, what you think of the affair."

"Asolute poppycock. Brian Button's an irresponsible idiot, and I wouldn't trust him with looking after the beer in the buttery, let alone those Cannongate Papers. But he wouldn't shoot old bloody Durham. Wouldn't have the nerve."

"Would you?"

"If you weren't old enough to be my father I'd tell you that was a damned impertinent question."

"Never mind the impertinence. Would you?"

"I don't know that I know." Bruno Bone was of a sudden entirely amenable. "It's an interesting speculation. On the whole, I'm ashamed to say, I guess not."

"Or would anybody else in the college?"

"Can't think of anybody."

"Then I'm left—so far as anybody who has been put a name to—with a London journalist whom Button sent for and talked to a shade rashly. There are journalists, I suppose, who are capable of anything."

"This one may have scented a hopeful whiff of blackmail, or something of that kind? And the Master may have got onto what he was up to and had his brains blown out for his pains? I wouldn't like to have to render such a course of events plausible in a novel."

"If you ever try I'll hope to read your attempt at it." Appleby gave this quite a handsome sound. "When did you last see Dr. Durham?"

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"When did I last see my father?" Bruno Bone was amused. "Quite late in the day, really. I'm not a bad suspect, come to think of it. Smart of you to be chasing me up, Sir John. Quite Bobby's father, if I may say so. Bobby's bright."

"I never judged him exactly dim, but the point's not of the first relevance. Be more precise, please."

"Very well. I went to see the old brute about an hour before he was indubitably dead. Probably the last man in, so to speak. A breathless hush in the close, and all that. I wanted to sound him out about the prospects of my touching the college for a travel grant. California. Awful universities, but a marvelous climate. Durham treated me as if I was a ghost. Bizarre, wouldn't you say? Considering he was so well on the way to becoming one himself."

"No doubt. What was the Master doing?"

"Concocting a letter."

"On some sort of dictaphone?"

"Nothing of the sort. Laborious pen and ink. And putting a lot of concentration into it, I'd say. He made a civil pretense of listening to me for about thirty seconds, then turfed me out. He was back on his job before I'd reached the door."

"And that was the last you saw of him?"

"No, it wasn't." Bruno Bone was sardonically triumphant. "And here's where I get off the hook. I saw him ten minutes later—and so must plenty of other people—crossing the great quadrangle with his letter in his hand. He went out through the main gate, crossed the road to the post office, shoved his letter into the box, and came back."

"There would be nothing particularly out of the way, would there, about all that?"

"Of course there would. He had only to leave the thing on a table in his hall and it would have been collected by a college messenger."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Bone. And I apologize for disturbing you."

Appleby's final call was on the senior History Tutor, an elderly man called Farnaby, who, he supposed, was in some vague and informal fashion Brian Button's boss.

"One of Button's indiscretions," Appleby said, "appears to have been dreaming up some popular articles based on the documents in his charge and calling in a man from some paper or other with

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whom to discuss the matter. Would you term his doing that a grave breach of confidence?"

"Certainly not. Button ought, no doubt, to have mentioned the matter to the Master or to myself in the first instance. It might even be said that there was a slight element of discourtesy in his conduct of the matter; and anything of the kind is, of course, greatly to be deprecated in a society like ours."

"Of course."

"But let us simply call it an error of judgment. Button has the makings of a competent scholar, but of what may be called *practical* judgment he has very little sense."

"I see. Would you say, Mr. Farnaby, that the young man's lack of practical judgment might extend to his supposing it judicious to murder Dr. Durham?"

"Of course not. I am almost inclined, Sir John, to say that the question could be asked only in a frivolous spirit. It is utter nonsense."

"So everybody appears to feel—except the police. Might Button be described as a protégé of yours?"

"I don't think we go in for protégés." Farnaby had frowned. "But I certainly feel in some degree responsible for him. He was my pupil, and it was I who recommended him for his present employment."

"Thank you. Now, it appears to me, Mr. Farnaby, that we have at present just one hard fact in this affair. The day before yesterday, or thereabout, some person unknown abstracted eight sheets from a file of photocopies, copied those photocopies anew, and then returned the newer and not the older photocopies to the file. The switch was almost certainly accidental rather than intentional. It could not have been designed to attract Button's attention, since there was no particular likelihood of his turning over those particular papers again before the static electricity had faded from them. At this specific point, then, we have no reason to suspect any sort of plot against the young man."

"Clearly not."

"Button went to the Master and told his story. The Master—if Button is to be believed, and if he didn't form a false impression—the Master responded to the story as if he had some inkling of what lay behind it. 'It rang a bell.' That is Button's phrase for it. Does that suggest anything to you?"

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"Nothing whatever, I fear."

"I suppose everybody would have learned almost at once about Button's cleverness in tumbling to the implications of that small electrical phenomenon?"

"Almost certainly. He's a young man who can't help chattering."

"Do you think that his chatterbox quality, and perhaps other forms of tiresomeness, may have been irritating the Master in a manner, or to a degree, Button himself wasn't aware of?"

"I'm afraid it is only too probable. Poor Durham was becoming rather intolerant of folly."

"That seems to be a view generally held, and it brings me to my last point. The Vice-Master has given me some impressions of Durham as a man. And he judges it rather odd, for one thing, that Durham should have thought to dictate a letter to the Cannongate trustees that could only have resulted in Button's being sacked. But again—and rather contradictorily—he represents Durham as increasingly irascible, indeed vindictive. How would you yourself describe the man?"

"He owned a certain complexity of character, I suppose. Sit beside him at dinner and you might judge him rather a dull, even a morose man, particularly during his recent ill health. But in solitude and at his desk he must have become something quite different, since his writing was often brilliantly witty—and maliciously witty, it may be added; whereas in all his college relations his sense of the academic proprieties extended almost to the rectitudinous."

Farnaby paused, and seemed to become aware of this speech as a shade on the heavy side. "In fact," he went on, "poor Robert Durham, barring occasional acts of almost alarming eccentricity, was a bit of a bore. But it would have been a safe bet that the memoirs he was working on would have been highly entertaining. You will recall that he was in political life as a younger man and knew everybody there was to know then. It was probably because he found Oxford a bit of a bore that *we* found *him* one. But I must not speak uncharitably. A horrifying mystery like this is a chastening thing."

"It is, no doubt, horrifying." Appleby stood up. "Or, if not horrifying, at least distressing. Whether it is a mystery is another matter. We can only wait and see."

"Wait and see, Sir John! I very much hope that the most active

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steps are being taken to clear the matter up."

"In a sense, perhaps they are. A little patience is what is required, all the same."

"And my unfortunate young colleague has to set us an example in the matter?" Farnaby spoke with asperity. "Button has to rest content in his cell?"

"I think not. It is improbable that any definitive step has been taken in regard to him. Perhaps I can make myself useful—in this way if in no other, my dear sir—by persuading my former colleagues to part with him. In fact, I'll take him back to Dream with me. He and Bobby can play tennis."

"And for how long will they be able to do *that?*" Although he uttered this question challengingly, Farnaby was clearly much relieved.

"Oh, until Monday morning. It's my guess that between breakfast and lunch on that day Dr. Durham's demise will effectively clear itself up."

And it was at ten o'clock on Monday that Appleby strolled out to the tennis courts. A police car had arrived at Dream and departed again, and Appleby now had some papers in his hand.

"Relax," he said to the two young men. "Your late Master willfully sought his own salvation. Or that's how the First Grave Digger would put it. *Felo de se.* Suicide. The letter has arrived, and all is now clear."

"The letter?" Brian Button repeated. "The one he was dictating—"

"No, no, B.B. Have some sense, my dear boy. The one your friend Bruno saw him writing and that he took over to the post office himself. Stamped, of course, as second-class mail."

"I don't understand you, sir." B.B. had sat down on a garden seat; he was almost as pale as when he had first arrived at Dream.

"And I'm blessed if I do either." Bobby Appleby chucked his tennis racket on the grass at his feet. "Explain, for goodness' sake."

"Come, come, where's all that absolutely top-dectective stuff?" Appleby was in irritatingly good humor. "And, Bobby, you had an instinct it was all a matter of Durham's calling it a day: don't you remember your prattle about the fire of life, and euthanasia, and whatever? As for the letter, it stared us in the face. The Master

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didn't want it to go out of his lodging through the college messenger service, so he took it to the post office himself."

"He was anxious," B.B. demanded, "to conceal whom he was writing to?"

"Not exactly that. *The letter was to somebody in the college.* And he didn't want to risk its being delivered, after his death, straight away by hand. Dispatched by second-class mail it would be delivered this morning. And it was. To the Vice-Master."

"And just what was this in aid of?" It was clear from his tone that Brian Button already dimly knew.

"It was in aid, my dear lad, of what his seemingly interrupted communication to the Cannongate trustees on that tape recorder was also in aid of. Something quite extravagantly malevolent. For let's face it, B.B. You had annoyed him. You had annoyed him quite a lot. And he was maliciously resolved to make his departure from this life the occasion of your experiencing *un mauvais quart d'heure*. Or rather more."

"He thought it was really me who had done that monkeying with the photocopies?"

"No, B.B. He couldn't have thought that. For the Master had done that second copying himself. Incidentally, the photocopying machine has been in use this morning. By the police. And they've sent me this."

Appleby handed a paper to B.B. "From the Master to the Vice-Master. Robert Durham's testament, poor chap."

My dear Adrian,

First, let me say how much I hope that the Fellows will elect you into the Mastership. If it should come about that I am permitted to look down upon the college from on high, or obliged to peer up at it from below, this will be the spectacle I shall most wish to view. Bless you, my dear man.

Secondly, pray have the police release that wretched Button. (Is not this appropriately reminiscent of some of the last words of Shakespeare's Lear?) If he be not in custody as you read this, it is because they have been so stupid and negligent as to neglect the tape recorder on my desk. But surely not even Dogberry and Verges could be so dull.

Button needs a lesson in (as we used to say) pulling his socks up. He is also (what, most illogically, I cannot quite forgive him) the immediate occasion of the step I am to take. The Cannongate

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Papers contain some fascinating things, and the censurable carelessness of this young man prompted me to help myself in a clandestine fashion to certain material useful to—shall I say?—a historian of the intimate *mores* of the more elevated classes of society at least not very long ago. Unfortunately the tiresome Button is very acute; he detected the theft and came to tell me about it with a mingling of trepidation, uneasiness, complacency, and self-congratulation which has extremely offended me.

I need not speak of my present state of health. What has told me that the time has come is really, and precisely, this Button business. He hasn't found me out but *I* have found *myself* out. And in an action of the weirdest eccentricity! As that equally tiresome Bruno Bone would tell you, the poet Pope speaks of Heads of Houses who beastly Skelton quote. But who ever heard of a Head of a House given to petty nocturnal pilferings?

Ave, Hadriane, morituris te salutat.

ROBERT DURHAM, Master

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Gerald Weales

The Country of Silence

Gerald Weales's first appearance in EQMM goes back twenty years, to our October 1958 issue. Too long, much too long, to wait for an encore—as this beautifully written second story proves. . .

Picture One. 1940. Studio Portrait. A slim man, almost elegant in his morning coat. The face, soft, good-looking in a conventional way. Mandatory smile, but genuine, with a hint of triumph. In the eyes? Distance? Bewilderment? The photographer's lights? On the man's arm, an armful. A prettily plump girl, a bridal gown well filled with fleshly promise. The face, a beaming pudding. The eyes, clear, direct. No, not cold. Not exactly. The left hand clutching a bouquet of strangled summer flowers.

Picture Two. 1971. Snapshot. Unposed. On the lawn. A small man, almost lost in a rumpled coat sweater. The face, soft, lined, nondescript. The mouth, tightly closed, protected—a little—by a slight mustache on the upper lip. In the eyes? Distance? Bewilderment? The sun? On the man's left, an institution. A large woman, a housedress stuffed with angles, points, sharp edges. The face, an open-mouthed accusation. The eyes, lethal. The right hand brandishing a bunch of summer flowers.

Nelson Appleton was not a contemplative man. He was quiet, the Lord knows, but it would never have occurred to him (had the neighbor who took the snapshot been unkind enough to pass it on) to wonder how he—they—had got from Picture One to Picture Two. There was no room for autobiography, no place for analysis in the zone of silence into which he retreated when his wife began to wrap him in her web of complaint.

As for Edwina Appleton, she would have recognized neither of the people in the photographs. She knew only and always that she was the victim, helplessly trapped in the world of Nelson's ag-

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gression, beset by cigar ashes (Nelson did not smoke), obscenity (Nelson did not swear), and insatiable sensual demands (Nelson did not, or if he did, not at home).

"When I think what I've had to go through," Edwina would say, as she stood waiting for the toast to burn, "what I've had to put up with all these years," she would say, slamming Nelson's coffee down in front of him, slopping it over the edge of the cup, filling the saucer, "so many years," she would go on, dropping into her chair, "a fat lot you care, you ungrateful beast, look at you, look at the way you go on, put down that paper for heaven's sake, can't you see I'm talking to you, other women," she would say, as Nelson folded the paper and left it on the table, "some other women have husbands," she would say, as Nelson found his hat and brief case, "husbands who show a little concern, a mod—" she would say, as Nelson closed the door "—icum of concern for their wives," she would say, as the door opened again at 6:15, "men who appreciate . . . who do . . . who think . . . who are genu—" she would say, passing in and out of the kitchen, putting the casserole on the table, "but no, not me, no, I had to get stuck with a man whose only concern—eat, for heaven's sake—whose only concern—I didn't work over a hot stove so that you could pick at your food like some stupid bird," she would say, snatching away his plate as his fork hovered over it, "a birdbrain whose only concern," she would go on, settling in front of the television, "his own selfish pleasures," she would say through the commercial, "his own precious little self," she would say through the program, "if I had it all to do over again," she would say as she turned off the television just as the news came on, "I would certainly never," she would say on the stairs, "get trapped by a selfish creature like you," she would say, turning out the light, "when I think," she would go on, ignoring the first faint whistle of escape from the sleeping man.

No one who watched Nelson slumping at the breakfast table, crumpled at the dinner table, propped up in front of the television, staring through the screen, the set, the wall beyond, could have guessed that he had found companions in the country of silence where he lived most of the time. "Mindless daydreaming," Edwina called it, and so it seemed. Until the boy arrived.

It was a chilly late-spring evening. The Appletons were in their

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usual places—her armchair, his straight-backed one—in the living room. The television was turned on to a variety show, celebrated for its wit and high ratings, and Edwina's monologue rode relentlessly across the introductory patter, the cute orchestrations, the frenzy of the stand-up comic. Suddenly, incredibly, Nelson spoke.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked, looking at the footstool that stood alongside his chair.

"What?" rasped Edwina. "What do you mean, am I comfortable?"

"Oh," said Nelson. He looked at his wife as though he had just now become aware she was in the room. He smiled. "I wasn't talking to you."

A silence. A brief one, while she studied his face for signs of malevolence. Then, mincingly, "To *whom* were you speaking?"

"Roger."

"Who?"

"Roger." He nodded toward the footstool.

"Are you crazy? There's no one there."

Nelson smiled at the footstool. In complicity. He tossed his head slightly, gesturing toward Edwina, and shrugged. Then he winked at the footstool. "Shall we take a walk?"

"Are you crazy, it's cold out."

"That's all right, we'll wear our coats. Won't we, Roger?"

As Edwina stared, silenced, he took his topcoat from the hall closet and put it on. He opened the door and held it for an instant, just long enough for an active boy to slip by, before he went out and closed the door behind him.

At breakfast Nelson tried to feed the boy. He broke a corner off a piece of toast and held it out, nodding encouragingly at the empty air just beyond his hand.

"Well!" shouted Edwina. "Well!" She pointed triumphantly at the unnibbled toast.

Nelson continued to look into the air, a hint of pleading in his eyes, and then a smile of understanding touched his lips. He nodded in agreement and put the toast back on his plate. He turned to Edwina, his voice, his manner passing easily through her armor of smugness. "You know, I don't think the boy likes burned toast."

At dinner Nelson pulled an extra chair up to the table and,

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when Edwina refused, he set a place for the boy himself.

"Everything all right?" Nelson asked the empty chair as they settled at the table.

"There's no one there, dammit," snarled Edwina.

"Don't swear in front of the boy." An unfamiliar sharpness touched Nelson's voice.

"I tell you there's no one there." This time a querulous whine crept into Edwina's assurance.

Nelson ignored her. As the dinner went on he kept offering bits from his fork to the boy. None were eaten, but the smiles, the assenting nods, the friendly words, the little jokes flowed from Nelson toward—toward something; and judging by Nelson's conviviality, there was a response.

Edwina muttered into her food. "... nothing there... crazy... ought to be locked up," but she found it difficult to take her eyes off the empty chair. Finally she became silent, ate mechanically. At one point, when Nelson lapsed into baby talk, she snapped, "Well, how old is that boy anyway?"

"About ten, I'd say." He turned toward the chair. "Ten, Roger?" Back to Edwina. "About ten."

"Then what's all that icky-bicky-boo nonsense? Who talks that way to a ten-year-old?"

"It's our little joke," he explained. He grinned at the chair, listened a moment, then broke into a pleased laugh.

After dinner Nelson and the boy decided to take another walk.

"Why don't you come with us?" Nelson asked.

"I'm not crazy," Edwina answered. She turned her back on the question, the set of her shoulders rejecting Nelson, his ideas, his invisible friend. She plopped into her chair and stared with unfamiliar absorption at the television screen, but as soon as the door closed she flipped the set off and began to prowl the room, straightening knickknacks that were not out of place. Finally she hunkered on Nelson's chair and waited for the walk to end.

Nelson burst in, flushed and laughing. "We ran the last block," he panted. "Am I out of condition!" He shook his head and puffed out a tiny whistle of resignation. "Still, I gave him a run for his money." He looked at a patch of carpet just inside the living-room door. "Didn't I, boy?"

"Oh, God," moaned Edwina.

"That's all right, dear," Nelson assurred her. "I'll get back in

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shape. I'll need to, to keep up with Roger."

Heavily, Edwina got to her feet and started to move toward the door. Nelson stopped her. "We've got to do something about a bed for the boy."

"A bed?"

He nodded. "To sleep on. You know."

"I know what a bed is," she snarled. "But why does he need one? Where'd he sleep last night?"

"Oh, just around." Nelson waved his hand vaguely. "But we can't have that, can we? A boy that age needs a place of his own."

"Nelson," she said patiently, "he doesn't need a place of his own because he doesn't exist. He isn't here. He isn't real."

"I'll tell you what we can do. We can set the folding bed up in our room."

"I am not going to have that child sleeping in my room," Edwina shouted.

"If he doesn't exist," Nelson said sweetly, "what difference does it make where he sleeps?" He looked at the spot on the rug and began to giggle.

"No," said Edwina. She began to shake her head. "No, no, no!"

"All right." He patted her shoulder, almost fondly. "I'll open that big old leather couch in the dining room. That way he'll have a place of his own and he won't be in your way. Besides," he said to the rug, "a big boy of ten doesn't need to sleep in his daddy's room."

The next evening, after work, Nelson brought a cap pistol home; the night after that, a basketball. The house, particularly the space around Roger's couch, began to fill up with toys. As the spring inched into summer, the toys began to lap out into the yard, and Edwina tried to still the questions in the neighbors' eyes with a complicated story about Nelson's work with underprivileged children.

He *was* gone a good deal of the time. He took Roger to the movies as often as possible, but Edwina refused to go. "I don't like Westerns." He and Roger went to the zoo, without Edwina. "I don't like animals." They went on all-day hikes alone. "I don't like to walk." They went camping on weekends and left Edwina at home. "I don't like insects." Finally, when Nelson's vacation came, they spent two weeks in the Smokies and sent funny postcards back to Edwina. "I don't like mountains."

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It was not quite as cozy as it sounds. There were still angry quarrels in which Edwina insisted that there was no Roger, there could be no Roger, there never would be a Roger. Attempted quarrels really because as soon as Edwina got on that subject, Nelson called the boy and left the house with him. Except in the middle of the night. Not wanting to disturb the boy, Nelson lay in bed and tried not to listen to Edwina's diagnosis (that he was crazy) and her threats (that she'd have him carted off to the asylum).

Actually it wasn't bad in the summer. Nelson was out of the house so much that Edwina's complaints scarcely bothered him at all. For that matter, Edwina didn't much mind having the boy around as long as she knew she wasn't going to be shut up in the house with him.

Then fall came, winter threatened. Nelson and Roger moved back into the house. In the evenings they took to playing on the couch in the dining room. It was a monster of an old sofa, even when it was closed, big enough for several grown men to crawl around on. Certainly big enough for one small grown man and a child of indeterminate size.

Sometimes it was a besieged castle. Sometimes it was a fort, as in *Beau Geste,* with the brave, doomed defenders fighting to their last shot. Sometimes it was a covered wagon crossing the prairie. Sometimes it was an escape car, outsmarting the cops and carrying the bank loot into the hills. Sometimes it was a racing car, closing in on the leader in the final lap at the Indianapolis 500. Sometimes it was a ship—a U.S. Navy vessel, a freighter in a storm, more likely a pirate frigate.

For Edwina, of course, it was only a couch. And a nuisance. She had had all she could take, she told herself. She had been patient. She had been understanding. She had even—now and then—reluctantly acknowledged the boy's presence. For eight months she had put up with the delusions of poor Nelson. That is what he had become—*poor* Nelson. She could take no more. Something had to be done.

She stood at the kitchen sink one November night, wiping the casserole dish and listening to the voices coming from the dining room, and made a decision. She put the dish in the cupboard, folded the cloth neatly and hung it on the rack beneath the sink. Everything in its place.

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Nelson simply had to be committed, she said to herself, that was all there was to it. He had to be told and right now. She paused inside the kitchen door.

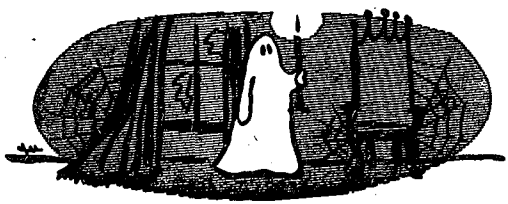
"There's a ship on the horizon," Nelson said. "Climb the mast, Black Hand, and see what colors she flies."

Edwina thought she heard another, lighter voice say, "Aye, aye, Cap'n," but her own "Nonsense" scattered that impression. She pushed open the kitchen door.

"Stop," Nelson shouted. He held up his hand in warning. "That's the ocean," he said, pointing at the dining-room rug.

Edwina snorted. "Nonsense," she said again and stepped onto the rug.

She sank without a trace.



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Edward D. Hoch

The Spy Who Didn't Remember

Number 21 in the series about Rand, the Double-C man, head of the Department of Concealed Communications . . .

About spies and counterspies: a character in this story says, "I think you guys are all in a dying occupation. Nobody wants spies any more. Hell, they don't die spouting patriotic slogans these days. They just get old and curl up and blow away in the wind."

If that were only true. It would mean that other things had curled up and blown away—like distrust between nations and men, like arms competition between nations, like war itself. Would it were true . . .

Counterspy-Detective: JEFFERY RAND

Melbourne left the cab at Leicester Square and headed up Coventry Street toward Piccadilly. He walked quickly, with eyes straight ahead, altering his pace only to avoid the occasional knots of theater-goers who crowded the sidewalk. The time was 7:21, and in less than ten minutes he would give the signal that would bring Saffron out of hiding for the rendezvous.

It was a cool April evening in London, and Melbourne breathed deeply of the crisp air as he walked. He passed the Prince of Wales Theatre, where something called *Catch My Soul* was playing in its third month, then a small brightly lit bookshop that displayed the latest American bestseller in its window. Ahead, the flashing signs of Piccadilly drew him on and he felt a springy certainty in his walk. Once contact had been established with Saffron the rest would be easy.

He thought of Gilda, waiting for him back in the room, but only for a moment. There would be time for her later, after the eve-

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ning's business was attended to—after the man named Saffron had closed the deal and sold out his country. A slight smile played along Melbourne's lips as he considered the evening's mission, and he wondered what these crowds of dull, chattering theater-goers would think if they knew. He could give them a better show than any of those on stage, and it would be played out right here, in the very center of London.

Melbourne paused for a moment on the curb, and then started across Piccadilly Circus. There was a sudden jostling behind him, and he turned his head, irritated, to utter some sharp words of complaint.

That was the last thing he remembered.

Rand met Hastings in the lobby of the hospital and he could see the lines of worry on the older man's face even before he reached him. Hastings didn't often look like that, so he knew the news was not good.

"How is he?"

"Bad, Rand. Very bad. Bad for us, that is. The doctors think he'll pull through, but there may be some brain damage."

Rand caught his breath, remembering the cheerful greetings he had always exchanged with Melbourne, the grin on the man's ruddy face as he told a funny story or listened to one. "What sort of brain damage?"

"Partial amnesia. It may be only temporary, but at this stage of things they just don't know."

"All right. Let's go see him."

George Melbourne was in a private room on the fifth floor, his head swathed in bandages and a blank staring look on his face. Rand dropped into a chair at the bedside and spoke softly. "Hello, George. How are you feeling?"

The head tilted slightly to look at him. "Who—who are you?"

"Rand, from Concealed Communications. Surely you remember me?"

"I don't—"

Hastings spoke from Rand's side. "George, we have to know about your meeting with Saffron."

"No—I don't—" And Melbourne's voice faded.

Rand stood up and moved to the window. After a few moments Hastings joined him and said, "I'm afraid it's hopeless for now."

"Just what happened to him last night?"

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"He'd gone to Piccadilly to meet Saffron. I gather he'd worked out some elaborate signal to bring Saffron into the open for the meeting. Anyway, he was crossing Piccadilly just before 7:30 when he was hit by a bus."

"Accident?"

Hastings glanced back at the bed and shrugged. "He may have been pushed from behind, before the bus struck him. Perhaps someone didn't want the meeting to take place."

"Do we have any other leads to Saffron?"

"None." Hastings looked again at Melbourne's bandaged head and said, "Let's go back to my office. There's nothing more we can do here."

An hour later, seated in Hastings' cramped and cluttered office overlooking the Thames, Rand lit one of his American cigarettes and asked, "Just how important was Melbourne to the success of the mission?"

"Damn it, Rand, he *was* the mission! He laid all the groundwork with Saffron and arranged for the man's defection. It was to take place last evening, right in Piccadilly. Melbourne was to signal him in some manner and Saffron would make himself known."

"Just how important is Saffron?"

"Only the top Russian agent in all Britain," Hastings told him, his voice and expression a study of frustration. "He wants to come over to our side, bringing with him a full list of other Red agents operating here, along with code books and planning directives. He telephoned Melbourne at home one night about a month ago. We've been carefully reeling him in since then, but his only contact has been with Melbourne. The actual defection was set for last evening."

"Perhaps Saffron will make contact with someone else if he's that anxious to come over."

"And perhaps not. If Melbourne was pushed in front of that bus it was by someone who knew about the intended defection. That might be enough to scare Saffron off."

Rand leaned back in his chair. "You think this is something for Double-C?"

"It is, if you want those code books. There's a secret message here, all right—the message Melbourne meant for Saffron. But it's not written on any piece of paper. It's locked somewhere in George Melbourne's brain."

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Rand nodded. "Where it might be beyond the reaches even of Double-C."

The girl's name was Gilda Bancroft, and Rand remembered meeting her once in Melbourne's company. She was a striking blonde, quite young, with the pouting face and wide lips one often saw in the cheaper London dance halls. When she opened the door to Rand she seemed to know at once why he'd come.

"George is dead, isn't he?"

"No, he's not. In fact, the doctor thinks he's coming along. I just wanted to ask you some questions. My name is—"

"Rand. I remember you. I remember faces."

She stood aside and allowed him to enter. Her apartment was little more than a sparsely furnished loft—a long narrow room with wide windows looking out on a dreary street scene. The room had been partitioned into sleeping and eating quarters by the addition of a folding screen of some vague oriental design.

Gilda directed him to a couch in what was meant to be the living-room section of the apartment. The furniture there seemed fairly expensive, and he suspected that Melbourne had bought it for her.

"I saw him this morning," Rand said. "He's going to pull through."

She eyed him uncertainly. "Then what do you want from me?"

"We know he's been seeing a great deal of you lately, Gilda."

"Yes," she admitted. "What's wrong with that? He's divorced from that bitch he was married to."

"Nothing's wrong." Rand tried to soothe her. "George was working on an assignment and we're trying to piece it together. We thought you might be able to help us."

"He didn't talk much about his work," she murmured.

"Did he tell you who he was meeting in Piccadilly? Did he ever mention a man named Saffron?"

She didn't answer immediately, but sat there regarding him with a calculating uncertainty. Finally she said, "I don't know how much I should tell you. I don't want to get George in trouble."

"Believe me, you'll be helping him. Anything you can tell us—"

"He went there to meet Saffron. He was quite excited about it, really. He talked of nothing else ever since this Saffron began calling and writing him."

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"There were letters?" Rand asked. He didn't remember Hastings saying anything about letters.

"Yes. He showed them to me. They're with his things."

Rand's heart beat faster. "May I see them, Gilda?"

She retreated into a pout. "I don't think he'd like that. They're here in his brief case, but he wouldn't like me going through it."

"I can assure you it's all in the national interest. The man named Saffron is a Russian agent—an important agent. He wants to come over to our side."

"I know. That's why George went to meet him."

"Get the letters, please."

She hesitated a moment longer and then stood up. He watched her disappear behind the screen, then return in a moment with two envelopes. "Here, I do hope it's all right."

Rand glanced at the postmarks and opened the first envelope. The letter was neatly typed, brief and to the point: *I am writing as I promised. The offer to come over to your side is a real one, and I will be in Piccadilly Circus every evening at 7:30, waiting for your signal. I long to flee the Russian yoke, and live with the freedom of one of your English blackbirds.*

There was no signature.

"He received that one about two weeks ago," Gilda Bancroft said. "The second one just came last week."

Rand opened it and read: *I have been waiting in Piccadilly Circus, even though I know it is too soon for your signal. I long to come over, but I know I must be careful. When you light up the sky with the numbers I give you, I know it will be safe, and I can live out my days in London like a good fat hen.*

Again there was no signature.

"This is all?" he asked the girl.

"All he showed me."

"Let me take these. It'll be all right. I'll give you a receipt for them, and when Melbourne is back on his feet I'll make it right with him. You won't get into any trouble."

"I hope not."

He rose to leave. "Is there anything else you can remember?"

"No."

"I'll be going, then."

She saw him to the door. "It's hell."

"What is?"

"Having a spy for a lover. . ."

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Hastings looked at the letters and read them over carefully. "They seem authentic," he said at last, "though there's really no way of knowing for certain. Mailed a week apart, here in London."

"It seems to me that Saffron is being unusually cautious. Why not simply arrange the meeting and then do it? Why all this playing with telephone calls and letters?"

Hastings leaned back, swiveling his chair around toward the window. "Saffron is a spy, Rand, the same as George Melbourne, the same as you and I. They can call us by all the fancy names they want, but we're still simply spies. Or counterspies—spying on the spies. After a time I think it begins to affect one's mind. Just look around you—Colonel Nelson forced into retirement with a nervous breakdown, Melbourne in the hospital with amnesia—"

"You can't blame Melbourne's condition on his work."

Hastings shrugged. "The doctor's not so certain. The bump on the head really shouldn't have caused all that damage. They think now it may simply have triggered a pent-up anxiety caused by overwork. Speeded up some sort of breakdown that was coming on anyway."

"And Saffron?"

"Why should the other side be any different from ours? Saffron may have become obsessed with passwords and secret messages. Then, too, he may want time to be certain he could trust Melbourne." He picked up the second letter. "*Light up the sky with the numbers I give you*—what do you make of that, Rand?"

"The signal was to be in the form of numbers. When Melbourne showed them in some way, Saffron would know he was safe to identify himself."

"Numbers in the sky? What could it mean?"

"I think I'll go over to Piccadilly this evening and try to find out."

Standing in the center of the famed intersection Rand imagined himself feeling much as George Melbourne must have on the previous evening. He glanced around at the colorful signs, occasionally allowing his eyes to wander down to street level, taking in the crowds of theater-goers and diners.

It was just 7:30, and if Saffron's letters had told the truth the Russian agent was somewhere in Piccadilly Circus at this very moment, waiting for the numbered signal that would light up the

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sky for him. Rand stared hard at the sky, but there were no numbers up there—only the inky blue of approaching night. He read the news bulletins on the moving electric sign along the south side of the intersection, but there was nothing for him there. He turned north, toward the line of movie theaters with their twinkling marquees, but all he saw were more people.

"Well! Mr. Rand!"

He turned, startled, and saw that the speaker was a bearded man named Max Stroyer, a sometime police informer whom Rand had dealt with on occasion. "How are you, Max?"

"What brings you to Piccadilly, my friend? Looking for a woman?"

"Hardly."

"I didn't think so." He stepped a bit closer, lowering his voice. "Then you must be on an assignment. Looking for spies and codes?"

Rand gazed at the bearded man, whose sharp brown eyes were on a level with his shoulder. "Let me buy you a beer, Max," he said suddenly. "There's a pub across the street."

"You think old Max can help you, eh?"

"Maybe."

Stroyer drank his beer while Rand was still waiting for the head on his to settle. "Now what do you want to know?"

"About a man named Saffron. Ever hear of him?"

Stroyer screwed up his face. "You're on to big things, ain't you?"

"Then you do know him."

"Not really. But I've heard the name. They say he delivers the information when it's needed."

"To the Russians?"

"Sure. Who else?" He finished the dregs of the beer. "I think you guys are all in a dying occupation. Nobody wants spies any more. Hell, they don't die spouting patriotic slogans these days. They just get old and curl up and blow away in the wind."

"Yes," Rand agreed. "I suppose you're right."

"You know I'm right. Don't let it happen to you, Rand."

"Max, where can I find Saffron?"

"Maybe he's right here, listening to us now. Remember those old war warnings? *Even the walls have ears!*"

"If you see him, Max, tell him I want to help him. Tell him he can reach me at this phone number."

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"Hell, I won't see him."

"If you do, Max."

"All right. Sure."

In the morning Hastings came into Rand's office in the Department of Concealed Communications. "The doctor phoned to say that George is much better. His memory seems to be returning."

Rand sighed with relief. "Thank God! I was beginning to think we were at a dead end."

"There something else, too."

Rand saw the envelope in his hand. "What is it?"

"I sent a man over to George's apartment last night, since he lives alone. This was in the mail. Looks like another letter from Saffron."

Rand studied the postmark. "Mailed the day of George's accident."

He ripped it open and read the familiar typed sentences: *This is my last letter. I look forward to meeting you soon, beneath the lights of Piccadilly Circus. I am ready to come over. I have the codes and the lists you want. I will end my days sitting in the park, watching the swimming swans.*

Rand put the letter in his pocket with the other two. "Come on. Let's go see Melbourne."

They found him sitting up in bed, a good color in his face and a tentative smile on his lips. "I say, don't I know you two? Let's see . . . Rand. Is that it? Rand!"

Rand smiled and shook his hand. "Glad to have you back with us. We were worried."

Melbourne touched his bandaged head. "It's all coming back to me, slowly. But I don't remember everything yet." He turned his head slowly toward Hastings. "I'm afraid I don't remember you, sir."

Hastings cleared his throat and identified himself. "That's all right, George. Think nothing of it."

"Do you remember anything about Saffron?" Rand pressed.

"Saffron . . . Saffron . . . I don't . . . The name seems familiar, though."

"Numbers. Piccadilly Circus."

"No . . . I was there, though, wasn't I? That's where it happened. The accident."

"Why were you there, George?"

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He looked blank. "I don't remember."

The following morning Rand found Hastings working at the main information computer bank. "Any word on Melbourne today?" he asked.

"Still coming along, but it's slow progress. Damn it, Rand, I hate to think of Saffron standing in Piccadilly Circus every night just waiting for the signal to defect, and we can't give the signal."

"You don't hate it half as much as I do. Perhaps we should simply put up a sign there and run a newspaper ad."

"And have him killed before he could do anthing? Someone almost killed Melbourne, remember."

"I've been thinking about that," Rand said, watching the older man as he selected a reel of computer tape. "Are we really so sure that's the way it happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps somebody lured Melbourne there to kill him for private gain, for some personal motive unconnected with Saffron."

Hastings shook his head. "You don't lure someone to the busiest spot in London to kill him, Rand." He punched a series of buttons on the machine and watched the reel begin to spin. "What about the letters? Any luck?"

"Not a thing. If they're concealing the number to be used as a signal, it could be done in any one of a hundred ways. Count the words, count the letters, substitute numbers for the first letter of each line, or the last letter. Add the dates shown on the postmarks, or subtract them. Everything is numbers, Hastings."

"Any idea what we should do?"

"Just wait for his memory to return. And hope Saffron will wait, too."

Rand went back to the hospital that afternoon and found George Melbourne with a visitor. She was a sad-faced middle-aged woman named Clare, who proved to be Melbourne's ex-wife. After the introductions she stared hard at Rand across the bed and finally said, "I hope you're pleased with what you've done to him."

"I didn't do it to him, Mrs. Melbourne."

"Don't call me that! It's not my name any more!"

"Sorry."

"Your foolish little children's games, your spying behind trees! The world doesn't need you any longer, Mr. Rand."

"So I've been told."

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"You see what you've done to his mind?"

The man in the bed stirred uneasily. "Clare . . ."

She had worked herself close to tears. "Why did I even come to see you? Go back to that tramp you spend the nights with. Go back to your spy games!" She turned and left the room.

"I'm sorry," Rand said. "I'm afraid that was my fault."

"Not at all," Melbourne reassured him. "She was always that way."

Rand pulled up a chair. "How's the memory coming along."

"Good, good."

"Saffron?"

"Yes. It's vague, but I'm beginning to remember. A Russian agent, here in London. He telephoned me at my apartment and offered to come over to our side. I . . ." He put his hand to his head.

"That's all right, George. Take it easy." Rand drew the letters from his pocket. "After the phone calls he sent you these letters. The third one arrived after your accident."

Melbourne read over the letters with growing excitement. "Yes, yes! I remember these first two—it's coming back to me now. He wanted some sort of signal, so he'd know he was surrendering to me and not to someone else. He said he knew of me, trusted me. We agreed that I would flash a number over Piccadilly Circus at 7:30 in the evening. Then he would walk to the center island where I'd be waiting, and identify himself."

"He gave you the number over the phone?"

"No," Melbourne answered slowly. "He said he'd sent it to me, in case his phone was tapped. He said he'd sent it in three letters, because the chances of all three falling into the wrong hands were slim."

"Who did he fear so much?"

"The Russians, I suppose. He was bringing valuable data with him. If they knew his plan to defect, they would have killed him to keep the data out of our hands."

"Tell me about this number. How were you going to signal him? What does he mean in this letter about lighting up the sky?"

But the dazed look had returned to Melbourne's eyes. "I can't . . . it's there but I can't quite grasp it, Rand. Perhaps tomorrow more of it will come back to me." He smiled pathetically. "I'm trying. I really am."

"I know you are, George."

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Rand went back to Piccadilly that evening and watched the crowds at 7:30. They were only faces to him, and he saw no one he knew except the bearded Max Stroyer, who was lounging in a pub doorway. Rand felt frustration running deep within him as he watched the people passing, fully realizing that any one of them might be the person he was seeking—any one of these men or—

He found the nearest coin telephone and called Hastings at home. "I'm in Piccadilly," Rand explained. "Something just occurred to me."

"What?" Hastings asked.

"Could Saffron be a woman?"

"A woman? We never considered that possibility. Why?"

"In the second letter there's something about *living out my days in London like a good fat hen.* Well, a hen is female, right?"

"I can't deny that."

"Why would a man use the phrase?"

"No idea," Hastings admitted.

"All right," Rand sighed. "It was just a thought." He hung up and went back to watching faces.

Two days later Rand took Gilda Bancroft with him to the hospital. Melbourne was sitting up and the bandage was gone from his head, revealing only a bump and some irregular stitches across his forehead. He remembered Gilda and rose unsteadily to greet her.

"I wondered if you'd ever come," he told her.

"Mr. Rand brought me. It's so far on the bus."

He turned to Rand. "I'm coming along fine. They say I can go home in another few days."

"That's good."

"I've been thinking about Saffron. We really do have to get to him somehow."

"Any suggestions?" Rand asked.

Melbourne sat down again. "It's a number. I know it is. A number in three parts."

"Three digits?"

"Perhaps more. I can't be sure."

"And where were you going to put the number?"

Melbourne frowned out the window, searching the sky. "High up somewhere. On a sign. On a moving sign."

"Yes," Rand said, remembering the moving news bulletins. That was where it had to be, the number in the sky that would

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lure Saffron out of hiding. "And the number was hidden in those three letters."

Melbourne nodded. "I just can't remember the details, though."

"What about the accident? Can you remember how it happened?"

"There was a jostling behind me. I started to turn—"

"He needs his rest," Gilda Bancroft interrupted. "You can't go on questioning him like this."

"No," Rand sighed. "You're right, of course. Take it easy, George. I hope you're out of here the next time I see you."

He waited in the hall for Gilda and she joined him in a few minutes. "He's better than I expected," she said.

"Yes, he's coming along."

"What about you? Any luck with your investigation?"

"Some. Mainly we're waiting for George's memory to come back."

"The man he was going to meet that night—Saffron—will he wait?"

"We can only hope so."

They walked outside, into the blinding April sunlight, and headed back toward Rand's little car. "When he's better I hope he quits this business," she said.

"Everybody wants us to quit. Two people told me the same thing in recent days. Nobody wants spies any more. Nobody wants war."

"George said his ex-wife came to see him."

"Yes."

"I met her only once. She's a bitch."

"She probably feels the same about you."

Rand climbed the worn stairs to the second floor of the office building overlooking Piccadilly Circus. The man he'd phoned was waiting for him and showed him into a narrow, crowded room dominated by a large desk with a typewriter-like keyboard.

"This is where we do it, Mr. Rand," the man explained. His name was Hawkins, and he was an employee of the London newspaper which ran the electric sign with its moving news flashes. "The message is punched onto tape by this machine, and the tape is then fed through here. The tape can be made into an endless loop to repeat the same news bulletins, or new messages can be added. Occasionally we might send through some random letters

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or numbers just to test the system, or to see if all the thousands of individual light bulbs out there are working properly."

"And, George Melbourne asked you to flash some numbers for him?"

The man nodded. "Mr. Melbourne came to me about two weeks ago. He identified himself and explained that it was a national security matter. He said that on a given night he would supply me with a number which I would run once on the news bulletin at exactly 7:30. It was a simple enough request, so I agreed to it."

"And the night was to be—?"

"He phoned last Tuesday—the day you say he was hit by the bus. He gave me the number and said to run it that night. I did as he said, but never heard any more about it. I never even knew he was injured until you told me today."

"He actually gave you the number?"

"Yes. I have it written down here. Do you want it?"

Rand picked up a pencil and jotted down six digits. "Was this it?"

"Yes. How did you know? Did Mr. Melbourne tell you?"

Rand shook his head. "A man named Saffron told me."

Two days later George Melbourne was released from the hospital. Rand and Hastings were waiting for him and they drove to his apartment while Rand outlined the plan. "I have the number, George. I figured it out from the three letters. You don't have to remember it now."

Melbourne looked relieved. "That's good. That was the one thing I still couldn't come up with."

"We can flash it on the sign, George, but we need you there. Saffron knows you and trusts you. The night you were injured, the number flashed on, but he didn't reveal himself—simply because you weren't there. I want you to come to Piccadilly with us tonight, George, and stand on that island in the center."

"Mightn't it be dangerous?" Hastings objected. "He was almost killed the last time."

"We'll be there," Rand assured him. "One of us on each side."

They arrived in Piccadilly shortly after seven, when the sky was still bright with the memory of the spring day, and the usual theater and dinner crowds were filling the sidewalks on all sides of the circle. Standing there on the center island, facing the moving sign above them, Rand could almost imagine what Saffron

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must have felt on all those nights. He only hoped it wasn't too late.

"You said you knew the number," Hastings prompted him.

Rand nodded. His eyes were scanning the crowds on the opposite sidewalk for a familiar face. "The part about the hen, in the second letter. It didn't really make sense, until I realized that each of Saffron's three letters ended with some reference to an animal. The first letter had blackbirds, the second had the hen, and the third had swans. If there was a number concealed in the letters, it was most probably concealed there. Now, are there any numbers connected with these three animals? Yes, there are—*four and twenty blackbirds,* from the famous nursery rhyme, gives us the number 24."

"But what about that good fat hen?"

"Another nursery rhyme, Hastings. *One, two, buckle my shoe,* and *nine, ten, a good fat hen.* Which makes our number so far—read 24910." Rand's eyes were on the moving sign above them. It was almost 7:30. His eyes scanned the crowd once more. If he was wrong all three of them could be in deadly peril. If he was right—

"The last part of the number?"

"Those swimming swans. *Seven swans a'swimming,* from *The Twelve Days of Christmas.*"

At his side Rand saw Melbourne tense. It was exactly 7:30 and the ribbon of light bulbs had gone suddenly blank. Rand continued talking, his voice a bit louder than he'd planned. "Making the full number 249107—the number that will bring Saffron out of hiding. The number that—"

And there it was, above them, starting its bright lonely journey down the track of light. 249107.

At his side George Melbourne turned and said, very quietly, "My name is Saffron. I am a Russian agent. I want to defect."

It was morning before Rand could talk about it, and he sat again in Hastings' office overlooking the muddy Thames and thought about the labyrinthine ways of the human mind.

"You mean you knew it all the time?" Hastings asked, incredulous.

"Not all the time, no." Rand was feeling very old. Once, long ago, George Melbourne had been a friend. "And even at the end I wasn't absolutely certain—not till he spoke. But I had to get him there to see the number on the sign. I knew if Melbourne and Saf-

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fron were two parts of the same person, the number would trigger Saffron's defection."

"It's like something out of Jekyll and Hyde!"

Rand nodded.

"Or Freud and Jung. Melbourne was a double agent in the truest sense. I think he began as any other double spy, simply playing both sides, but something happened along the line. Saffron gradually became an entirely separate personality—so much so that when he decided to come over to the British side he insisted on surrendering only to Melbourne. That's when the letter writing began, and the imaginary phone calls."

"And the accident?"

"It really was an accident, a jostling by the crowd. Of course Melbourne must have been under tremendous mental pressure that night, and the slightest damage to his head brought on the temporary amnesia. Remember, the doctor told you he suspected some pre-existing mental condition that was merely triggered by the accident. That was the only danger last evening. If I was wrong, and someone had tried to kill him, our lives might have been in jeopardy standing out there. But I was almost certain I was right."

"How could you have known, though, Rand? I never suspected such a thing."

"The number. It was all in the number. Melbourne went to meet Saffron last Tuesday night *knowing the complete number.* In fact, he'd even phoned the sign man that day and told him the number to flash on the screen of light bulbs. But remember, the third and final letter did not arrive at Melbourne's apartment till the following day, the day after his accident. On Tuesday he could not possibly have known that 7 was the final digit of the number. He could not even have guessed at it, because the first two letters contained two-digit and three-digit numbers, both from nursery rhymes. The final letter contained a one-digit number from a Christmas song. Melbourne could not possibly have anticipated that final number—he could have known it only if he had originated it, only if he had written the letters himself. Only if, in short, he was Saffron."

"What will happen to him now?" Hastings wondered.

"That's for the doctors to say. In my opinion he's pretty far gone on this split personality."

"And the codes and lists he was to deliver?"

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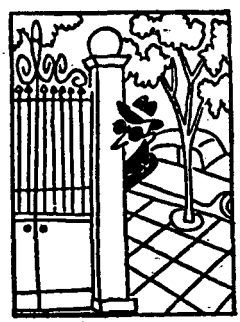
"I think he'll tell us about them. If he doesn't, I have an idea where they might be found—in that brief case of his at Gilda Bancroft's apartment."

Hastings nodded, stirring uneasily behind his desk. "What was it that did it to him, Rand? Overwork? His wife? What pushed him over the line?"

There was no simple answer. Rand stood up and walked to the window. The river seemed darker than usual this day. "He was on the road to madness, Hastings, and the games we play were too much for his mind. Sometimes, when I think about it, I wonder if we're not all on the road to madness—the spies and the generals and even the politicians who pay us. We're in a world that doesn't want us any more, and maybe Melbourne knew it."

"I think he did," Hastings said quietly. "I think we all know it. But we keep on with it anyway."



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Christianna Brand

Clever and Quick

We all know the meaning of the phrase, "the eternal triangle"—husband, wife, and a lover. But surely there is "the eternal quadrangle"—husband, wife, and two lovers. Was this the situation in which Raymond Gray, an out-of-work, has-been actor, found himself? Even though one "angle" of the four-sided triangle was dead?

Another of Christianna Brand's unputdownable studies of people enmeshed in love, hate, greed, malice—and murder ... .

You had to keep up appearances; so the apartment was very showy, everything phony right down to the massive brass fender in front of the electric fire. But keeping up appearances was one thing and keeping up the payments was another; and with the theater as it was these days, both of them had been "resting" for a long, long time. So the fact was that they really ought to let Trudi go.

Trudi was the *au pair* girl and for different reasons neither one wanted her to go.

They were having a row about it now, standing in front of the fireplace. They had a row on an average of once an hour these days—nag, nag, bloody nag. Colette was driving Raymond out of his mind. And now this thing about Trudi. If he secretly (somehow) made up Trudi's pay? He suggested, "Try offering her a bit less for the work."

"*You* try offering her a bit less—for the pleasure," said Colette.

It touched him as ever on the raw. "Are you suggesting—?"

"Raymond, that girl thinks of nothing but money and you know it."

Yes, he knew it, and with the knowledge his heart grew chill. If a time came when he could no longer give Trudi presents— He was mad about her—a little sharp-eyed, shrew-faced mittel-European—and yet here he was, caught, crazy for her, helpless in

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the grip of her greedy little claws. He, Raymond Gray, who all his life had been, on stage and off, irresistible to women, now caught in the toils of a woman himself. If I were slipping a bit, he said to himself, if my profile were going, if my hair and my teeth weren't so perfect as once they were—but he was wearing marvelously well. Why, even that drooling old monster in the opposite apartment—

She was not a monster, though she was a big woman and, having once been something of an athlete, now found all the fine muscle running to flabby white fat. But drooling? She was disgusting, she thought, out of her mind—a fat, ugly, aging widow, sitting here drooling over a has-been matinee idol not much more than half my age.

But, as he was caught and helpless, so was she—caught and helpless, sitting there like a silly schoolgirl, yearning only to pop out to her balcony and see if, through his window, she could catch a glimpse of him. From her room she could not see into his; the apartments were not in fact opposite each other but across a corner, at the same level.

But she dared not venture forth. The plane trees in the street just below were in full pollination and if she so much as poked out her nose, her allergy would blow up sky high. And even just passing in the corridor, going up and down in the elevator, he mustn't see her with streaming red eyes and nose.

She spent a good deal of time in the corridors and the elevator. "Oh, Raymond," she would cry, "fancy running into you again!" She had long ago scraped up an acquaintance and it was Raymond, Colette, and Rosa between them now. They were not unwilling—her place was rich in champagne cocktails and dry martinis, with lots of caviar on little triangles of toast. She was loaded.

Colette said so now "Can't you wangle something out of the old bitch over there? She's loaded, and if you'd so much as kiss her hand she'd chop it off and give it to you, diamond rings and all."

Her hand was like a frog's back, all speckled with the greeny-brown patches of aging skin. "All the same, I'll tell you something," he said. "If you were out of the way, damn nagging so-and-so that you are, she'd make me a ruddy millionaire, I swear she would."

"Yes and where would your precious Trudi be then? Because," said Colette nastily, "I don't think dear Rosa would put up with

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very much of *that* little load of fancy tripe."

"Don't you call Trudi names!" he shouted.

"I'll call her what she is. I'm entitled to that much, surely?"

She had a vile mind, a vile mind and a foul mouth to express what was in it. It flashed across him in a moment of hazy light, red-streaked, that once he had loved her—never dreaming that behind the façade lay this creature of venom and dirt, never dreaming that one day he would stand here with upraised hand, would lunge forward and strike out at her, would have it in his mind to silence her forever.

But his hand did not touch her. She stepped back and away from him, tripped over the rug on the polished floor before the fireplace, fell heavily, almost violently throwing herself back and out of his reach. A brief shriek, arms flailing, a sickening scrunch as the base of her skull hit the rounded knob of the heavy brass fender. And suddenly—stillness.

He knew she was dead.

Trudi stood in the doorway, then moved forward to him slowly. She said, "Is all right. I saw. You did not touch her." And she fumbled for the English word. "Was—accident?" She came close beside him, staring down. "But she is dead," she said.

She was dead. He had not touched her, it had been an accident. But she was dead—and he was free.

It took him a little while to accept that Trudi was not going to tie up her life with an out-of-work, has-been actor, free or not free. "But, darrleeng, you know that your money all is gone, soon I must anyway leave. Mrs. Gray she has told me so." And since Mrs. Gray was lying there dead on the floor and could not contradict, she improvised a hurried tally of the debts already owing to her. "And this I must have, Rraymond, soon I go home if I have no more a job here."

To be free—to be free to marry her and now to lose her! He pleaded, "Don't you love me at all?"

"But of course! Only how can we marry, darrleeng, if you have no money to live? So this money I must have, to go home."

"You can't go yet, anyway. You'll have to stand by me about—her." He had almost forgotten the poor dead thing lying there, ungainly, at their feet. "You'll have to give evidence for me."

She shrugged. "Of course. Was accident. But then I go home."

"Leaving me here like this? Trudi, I have no wife now, no money—"

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The little shrug again, so endearing to his infatuated heart, half comic, half rueful; the wag of the pretty little head toward the window across the corner. "As to wife, as to money—over there, plenty both."

He said quickly, "Then I should be rich. So you and I—?"

But she said, as a few minutes earlier Colette had said, "I don't think Mrs. Rosa Fox puts up with nonsense. I think she suddenly pulls the moneybags—tight."

Did the idea come to him all in a flash as it seemed at the time?—or was there an interval while he thought?—while he stood over his wife's dead body and carefully, deliberately, thought it all through to the end? All he knew afterward was that suddenly he had Trudi by the arm, was talking to her urgently, pulling her to kneel down beside as, very delicately, he scraped from the round brass knob of the fender a fleck of the blood so rapidly congealing there, smearing it over the round brass knob of the poker, the knob identical in size, covering the smears with his own hand. And finally he threw the poker back into the fireplace.

"Now, Trudi, slip out, don't let anyone see you. Buy something somewhere. Come back right away and this time let the porter see you."

He did not look back, as he scrambled to his feet, at the still sprawled body—he had not even that moment to spend on the past. The future was now ahead of him. Only, he prayed, as he furtively slid out into the corridor, let Rosa be in! And let her be alone!

She was in and alone. She was always in and alone these days, flopped in an armchair, dreaming like an adolescent girl of her hopeless, her helpless, love. "A woman of my age," she thought, "sitting here mooning over another woman's husband." But she'd been quite a gal in her day and widowed a long, long time. Now she said, "Raymond—how lovely!" And at once, "But what's the matter, my dear? Are you ill?"

"Rosa," he said, "You must help me!" And he fell on his knees before her, grabbing at her skirt with shuddering hands—really, with all that talent it was quite extraordinary that he couldn't get more work! He threw a hoarse quaver into his voice. "I've killed her," he said.

She stepped back and away from him. "Killed her?"

"Colette. I've killed her. She went on and on. She said horrible things about—about you, Rosa. She thinks you—she always said

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that you—Rosa, I know you've liked me—"

"I love you," she said simply; but she took a deep, deep breath while the future spread out before her—as earlier his own had opened out to him. His wife was dead and he was free.

He pretended amazement at her answer—amazement and gratitude; but he was too clever to claim immediately a return of her feeling. He came at last to the point. "Then, even more, Rosa, may I dare to ask you what I was going to. I am throwing myself on your mercy, just praying that out of friendship you will help me. And now, if you really mean that you—"

And he went with her to the sofa and sat there gripping her hands and poured it all out to her. "She was being so vile. She had—well, she's dead, but Colette had a filthy mind, Rosa. She'd been going on like this for weeks and suddenly I couldn't stand it any more. I saw red. I—I picked up the poker. I didn't mean to harm her—honestly, I swear it—just to frighten her. But when I came to myself again—" And he prayed, "Oh, my God, please try to understand!"

"You did this because she was saying foul things about *me*?"

"You've always been so nice to us, Rosa; it just made me sick, her talking like that, sneering and jeering." And he poured it all out again, living through the scene, only substituting her name for Trudi's. Her big plain face went first white, then scarlet, then white again. She held tightly to his hand. "What do you want me to do?"

"Rosa, I thought very quickly—I do think quickly when I'm in a spot. It seems awful now, her lying there dead and me just thinking of myself, trying to fight my way out of it. But that's what I did. And then I knelt down and—well, there are two brass knobs on the fender exactly like the one on the poker and I—I moved her head so that it looked as though she'd hit it against one of the fender knobs, and then I cleaned all the—the blood and stuff off the poker—"

She was a clever woman—quick and clever. The body might have slowed down, the body that once had been so strong and under control, but the mind was still clever and quick. "An accident," she said.

"Yes, but—people knew we were always quarreling. Trudi must have known it, of course. They could say I'd pushed her, given her a shove." He gave her a sick look that was not too difficult to assume. "At the least—manslaughter," he said.

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Clever and quick. "You want me to say that I *saw* what happened? That you didn't hit her?"

"My God," he said, "you're marvelous! Yes. You could say you saw it all through the window, saw me standing there talking to her, say frankly that we seemed to be arguing, make it look as though you're not too much on my side, just a casual neighbor. And then—there's a rug there, you know it, very silky and slippery—you skidded on it once yourself, remember? Perfectly possible for her to have taken a backward step, slipped and fallen backward; and of course that would be all you'd know—you can't see down to the floor of our room, even from your balcony."

"But I'd have to say I was out *on* the balcony. I can't see your window from in here."

He had thought that out too. "Your balcony's only overlooked by two flats, and all those people will have been out; I know them. No one could say that you *weren't* there."

"All right," she said.

"You'll do it for me?"

"Of course. But what about that girl, that little trollop, whatever her name is—the *au pair*?"

He could hardly keep the stiffness from his voice but he controlled himself. "Out shopping, thank God!" And thank God, also, that Rosa couldn't in fact have been on the balcony, looking in, seeing Trudi there in the room with him. He knew all about the allergy, and one glance at her face confirmed it—Rosa hadn't been out.

"Well, go back now. You must call a doctor quick. And say nothing about me. Just tell your story, don't seem even to think of bringing me into it. They'll be round here soon enough, asking if I saw anything. Now, time's passing, you really must go."

He started for the door but suddenly he paused. "Rosa!" He had assumed a look of shame but over the shame a flush of exultancy. "Rosa, it's awful to have even thought of it, but suddenly it's come to me. A trial for murder! You know how things are in the theatrical business, you know how things have been with me lately. But if I were suddenly in the news! Accused of murder—standing there at the Old Bailey, headlines in all the papers, a *cause celebre!* And then—the dramatic intervention, the witness who'd seen it all, the last-minute evidence." He stood before her, half shame-faced, half pleading. "Rosa?"

"Why didn't I give evidence before? They'd never even have

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charged you if I'd spoken at once."

"Well, that's the point. I *must* get myself arrested and tried. You'd have to say you hadn't realized, you didn't want to get mixed up in it. But then of course the moment you heard I was accused—"

"Even so you wouldn't get further than the first hearing, whatever it's called. No publicity in that."

"You couldn't—just be abroad for a little while, out of touch?"

She opened her mouth to say that none of it mattered, he'd never need to work again. But she held her peace. He was an actor, actors needed to work, they had to express themselves. "Leave it all to me. I'll handle it," she said.

The earlier headlines were not too bad though hardly sensational and then came the long dull period before the trial opened. However, at last—the day. Himself in the dock, very pale, very handsome. The police in the witness box. "Accused stated—" A flipped-over page in a notebook. "Accused stated, 'Oh, my God, this is awful, I must have hit out at her, I must have had a blackout, she was nag nag nag at me the whole bloody time because I wasn't getting work, but I never meant to harm her, I swear I did not.' "

And the forensic evidence. "On the head of the poker I found a small smear of blood." The smear had been consistent with the blood of the dead woman, with having come there at the time of her death. Tests showed that the accused had handled the poker after the blood came there. Yes, consistent with his having attempted to remove marks of blood with the palm of his hand, missing the one small smear. The blade of the poker appeared to have been wiped—it showed no fingerprints.

In reply to defense counsel: Yes, it was true that the blade of a poker would not be much handled in the ordinary way and the wiping might well have been simply the previous routine cleaning. The doctor testified that the woman had been dead between half an hour and an hour when he saw her.

Trudi in the box for the defense: shrewd and cool. Had arrived back from the shoppings to find Mr. Grray on his knees beside the body; had had almost to lift him to his feet. Yes, he might very well have touched the poker with his hand, made bloody by his examination of the wound; his arms were all over the place as she hauled him up. She had trried to get him calm; wanted to call a

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doctor but did not know the number of him, and Mr. Grray seemed so dazed she could get no sense from him. And anyway, what was the hurry, said Trudi with one of her shrugs. Anybody could see that Madame was dead.

And so at last to Rosa Fox. She had with extraordinary dedication deliberately shed all aids to such doubtful charms as she possessed—stripped off the jewelry, dressed herself drably, sacrificed the cosmetics which ordinarily, to some extent at least, disguised the ravages of her age. Not for one moment could anyone suspect that here stood a woman with whom the prisoner could ever have had the slightest rapport.

Into the agreed routine. The casual acquaintance, the occasional drink together. The question of the police directly after the—accident. Agreed she had previously insisted she had seen nothing. She had been unwell, under great private tensions, wanted only to get abroad to a health spa where she had been ever since. She hadn't wished to become involved. Never dreamed, of course, that there could possibly be any charge against Mr. Gray, knowing as she did with absolute certainty that the thing had been entirely an accident. Because in fact she had actually seen it happen.

"From my balcony you can look straight into their room. I glanced over and saw them standing there. They seemed to be having an argument. He said something angry, she jerked away from him as though he had raised his hand against her—"

"Mrs. Fox, had he anything in his hand?"

"In his hand? Oh, the poker you mean? No, nothing, no poker or anything. And anyway, he never raised his hand."

"He never raised his hand? You can swear to that?"

The Judge from the Bench said solemnly, "Mr. Tree, she *is* swearing to that. She is swearing to everything she says. She is under oath."

"Well, I could see it all quite clearly and I certainly can swear—well, I mean I am absolutely sure he never raised his hand at all. He said something. She stepped back and then she seemed to trip and topple over backwards. I thought to myself. 'Oh, she's skidded on that rug of theirs!' I know that rug—very treacherous it is on the parquet floor. I nearly slipped on it once myself. Well, and then I went back into my room and thought no more about it."

"It didn't occur to you that she might have injured herself?"

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"I thought she might have banged her head or something but of course no more than that. As I say, I'd slipped there myself and been none the worse for it." And she made a little face and admitted that if the lady had collected a couple of bruises it would have been no more than she deserved. "I think she nagged him. But of course I didn't know them well."

Headlines, yes. But not much really and often not even on the center pages, let alone the front page. But there was a big picture of him planned for Sunday, with an interview—celebrating, a glass of champagne raised to the neighbor whose testimony had confirmed his innocence. Not perhaps in the best of taste, the picture taken right there in front of the fireplace where his wife had died. But it wasn't a best-of-taste newspaper and one settled for what one could get.

And the reporters withdrew; and at last they were alone in his apartment.

She held out her hands to him. "Well, Raymond?"

She looked about a hundred years old standing there before him, the sagging face devoid of its makeup, the ugly dull dress, the droopy hairdo, the mottled hands without their customary diamond flash. She revolted him.

"Well, Rosa, you did a beautiful job."

She did not hear the chill in his voice, or did not believe it. She said softly, "And one day soon—shall I collect my reward?"

"Reward?" he said.

"After all, my darling, I have perjured myself for you."

"Yes, so you have, haven't you?" he said.

Now the unpowdered skin took on a strange ashen color, and her eyes grew frightened and sick. "Raymond, what do you mean?"

"I mean that you perjured yourself, as you say; and you know, perhaps, what happens to perjurers?"

A clever woman, quick and clever. But still she insisted, "I don't understand."

"I need money, Rosa," he said.

"Money? But if we were married—"

He moved aside so that she looked over his shoulder and into the mirror above the fireplace.

He said, "You? And *I? Married?*"

She looked long, long at her pitiful reflection. She said at last, "Is this blackmail?"

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"Wasn't it blackmail when you thought that by saving me from prison you could force me to marry you?"

"Yes," she said. "I think perhaps it was." And she thought to herself that now she was beaten at her own game. "If you give me away," she said, "you'll have to admit you murdered her."

"In fact I didn't murder her. I can say it happened almost exactly as you said in court."

"Very well then," she said swiftly, "I can change my story. Who can prove that I didn't see you murder her?"

"*I* can prove that you didn't see it. You couldn't have been out on your balcony. The plane trees were pollinating and anyone will confirm to the police what happens if you so much as open a window when the pollen's flying about. But when they first saw you, you showed no traces of any allergic reaction. I know, because I'd just seen you myself.

"Besides, they couldn't touch me. I've been 'put in peril,' as they say—*autre fois acquit* is the legal name for it. Once acquitted I can't be tried again for the same crime. I could shout from the housetops that I'd killed her and still be safe."

"And live with that reputation?"

"Well, of course I *wouldn't* say I'd been guilty—which anyway, as I keep telling you, I wasn't. I'd still claim it had been an accident. But *you* would be in the soup."

"I see." She pondered it long and carefully, still staring, but unseeingly now, at her sad reflection in the glass. "You thought all this out from the very first, didn't you? In detail, from the very first?"

"Quite a nice little bit of opportunism," he suggested, proud of it.

"All that about the publicity? The blood deliberately smeared on the poker? Yes, I see. You had to give them something, you had to get yourself accused and charged, you had to be tried and acquitted before it was safe to accuse me. Two purposes to my perjury: first to supply the evidence that would set you free and second to make me vulnerable to blackmail." She said almost curiously, almost as though she were humbled for him rather than for herself, "Did you never even like me?"

"I didn't mind you," he said indifferently. "But as for marrying you—I think I'm a trifle more particular than that." And he picked up her handbag, helped himself to the thick wad of banknotes there, stuffed them loosely into his wallet, tucked the wallet

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away. "Just a very, very small beginning, my dear," he said.

"I won't even ask how much you're demanding. You'll be back again and again and again of course, won't you? But by way of a start—?"

"Make it ten thousand," he said. "You can get that much quickly."

He smiled at her with cruel and ugly triumph. "And I need it quickly—for my honeymoon," he said.

Clever and quick. Clever not even to have to ask the name, to have summed it all up in one bright intuitive flash. And quick. The poker with its round brass knob lay there on the fender. She snatched it up—and struck.

Trudi burst open the door, darted forward from her listening post, slowed, then came smoothly the rest of the way and knelt beside him. For what seemed a long, long time they both stared down as only a few short months ago Raymond Gray himself had looked down at the dead body of his wife. It was his turn now.

Rosa's fat white arms retained something, it seemed, of their once splendid muscle; long-ago anatomical training had suggested the most susceptible spot. The heavy ball of the poker had smashed to a cobweb of fractures Raymond's delicate temple bone.

Trudi moved. With a small sick grimace she shifted Raymond's head a little way, so that the wound lay crushed against the round brass knob of the fender.

"That rrug!" she said, getting up to her feet again. "Always so dangerous! Fancy, a second time, just the same like the poor wife!" She grinned with brutal complacence into the heavy white face with its look of dead despair. "So lucky that this time *I* was present, to see that it all was again just a terrible accident."

Raymond's jacket had fallen open. She stooped and with fastidious fingers picked out the wad of notes and stuffed them into her apron pocket.

"Just a verry, verrry small beginning," she quoted and took the poker out of Rosa's inert hand. "Go back to your flat, Madame. Collapse upon your bed. I see to everything, then I make telephone to the doctor." The Trudi shrug. "This time I know the number of him."

Rosa went back to her own apartment. She did not, however, collapse upon her bed.

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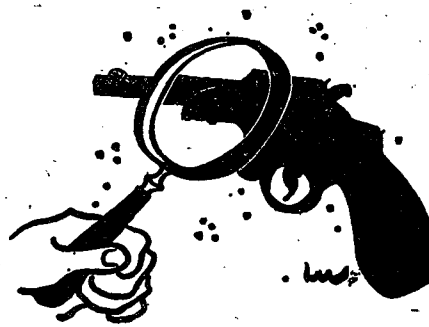
"Police?" she said, holding the telephone receiver in a steady hand. She gave Raymond Gray's address. "You'd better get over there quick. I've just seen from my balcony the *au pair* girl going for him with a poker. And this time—no question of an accident."

She listened with a satisfied smile to a sharp voice cracking out orders. The voice returned to her. "Well, I wouldn't know about that—I can't see to the floor of the room. The girl disappeared from sight for a bit and when she got up she was stuffing money into her apron pocket. You'll find it, I daresay, hidden somewhere in her room. An affair going on, you know, even before the poor wife died; and now I suppose he was refusing to marry her."



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John Pierce

Once a Cop

If you read a story in which a shoemaker is the murderer, you know of course that not every shoemaker is a murderer. Or if you read about a corrupt politician, you don't have to be reminded that most politicians are not corrupt. Or if you read about a fraudulent Old Master, you know that not every Old Master is bogus, that not every art dealer is dishonest . . .

Detective: INSPECTOR SEAL

"I've been locked up for less than that," commented Fingers Hinschelman, who had also been locked up for more.

"They do seem incautiously loud," agreed Seal, Chief Inspector (retired).

Reference was to a set of sounds gusting from a front window of the Peter Pan Nursery and Reading School. An unmatched set of sounds—raucous, overloud, unnerving. A recorded band thundered *Anchors Aweigh* in accompaniment to the brisk military commands of Miss Springer as amplified through a granular loudspeaker. It threatened the tree leaves as it laced its way halfway across the park to the stone bench that the two men occupied.

". . . *HERE* WE GO NOW, *ROUND* THE WORLD, *ROUND* AND *MARCH*ING, *THREE* AND *FOUR; FAST*ER, WILLIAM, THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT,* REUBEN, *GREECE* IS NEXT AND *HUP* AND TWO AND THREE AND FOUR . . ."

"Should I ask what that is?" puzzled Hinschelman.

"Moppet geography," Seal conjectured. "I'd suspect they have a world map chalked out on the floor across which the class marches Napoleonically." (" . . . *THREE* AND FOUR . . .")

"And that's your lady friend drilling them?"

Seal failed to answer. Was it? Not since that candlelit evening a

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month ago had he seen or talked to Miss Springer, a bounteously endowed divorcee in her thirties. He did not have her address; she was not in the phone book. Twenty years on the force and he could not relocate a simple winsome woman—until yesterday when, quite inadvertently, he met her leaving this nursery school where, it turned out, she taught.

He had walked with her to the branch post office where she mailed off a package of school business to something called the Ubiquity Mailing Service in San Francisco. She seemed flustered at seeing him, resistant to his overtures. Still he persisted until she accepted his dinner invitation for tonight. Now, hearing her amplified voice, reservations fought him like mosquitoes. This was Miss Springer, with the drill-sergeant voice? Had police work diluted his judgment?

The question was pigeonholed. A blue sedan parked between the school and the corner candy store and its driver, an elegant, graying gentleman in stylish garb, worked free. Armed with a brief case and a small box camera, he crossed the street to the school, nodded to the heavy-set handyman at the bright red door, and vanished inside.

"Why, that's Antoine Grivas," remarked Seal.

"Don't know him," said Hinschelman, "but I've seen that guy at the door."

"Big name in education, Grivas. World traveler, twelve languages, crack photographer, and heads up a large philanthropic outfit—Foster Children International."

"Know him, Inspector?"

Seal shook his head. "I've seen him wandering around the slums with his camera. Then happened onto a showing of his photographs at a local art gallery a month ago. Same day and place I first met Miss Springer, though I scarcely thought them connected in any way."

"What kind of photographs?"

"Poverty. Torn posters on old board fences, rundown tenement buildings, close-ups of underprivileged children, the faces of the poor."

"And you paid to see *that*?"

"No, just happened by the gallery. No admission fee. It was the afternoon of my last day on the force and I was en route, with your old nemesis Captain Stout, for a glass or two of Auld Lang Syne. We took a look in. Regrettably, sirens in the street called

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Stout back to duty and, left alone, I met Miss Springer. My evening continued with her."

"Did you tell her you were a cop?"

"No, didn't mention it. Why?"

"The fact that you didn't is why. Dame like that, hanging around art galleries, might look down her nose at a cop."

"I hardly think she's that sort."

"But she did disappear."

"Like a lead bar at eighty fathoms."

"What's a hotshot photographer like him doing with a cheap Brownie camera?"

"Could be primitivism's back in vogue."

"So now you find out she and Grivas are teaching in the same kiddie school. Jealous, Inspector?"

"Don't be ridiculous," dissembled Seal. Nosy fellow, Hinschelman. His mind is like his fingers on a safe knob or lifting a wallet. Annoyingly acute. Was it in fact jealousy, this pollution of his happy mood? Was Grivas the gray force behind her tantalizing secretiveness, her refusal to tell him where she lived?

He thanked heaven he was well back in the park—behind the green foliage, beyond the equestrian bronze of the dyspeptic General Grant. To be spotted by her and thought spying would be unthinkable. Spying he was, in point of fact, but she could hardly have known it was five-year-old William Wagner—one of her blue-chip marching pupils—he rode tail on. Nor, under any circumstances, could he tell her.

"... WHO'S ON *CHI*NA? COME *BACK*, WILLIAM; *N-O-W* YOU'VE GOT IT, THREE AND *FOUR* ..."

"Little William's your quarry, right?" came from Hinschelman.

"William, alias Billy. Yes."

"Like to have a look at him."

"You will. They'll soon break for afternoon recess and adjourn to that candy store."

"What's his problem? What's his mother worried about?"

"The source of the lad's daily income. Each morning he is delivered to the Peter Pan School, pockets bare of funds. In the afternoon he returns home clinking small change, devoid of appetite, his mouth a rainbow of bilious colors from the candy shop. She—his mother—is the daughter of an old friend. She cornered me at a recent soirée and I was trapped into volunteering my services. I now tail a five-year-old when I should be out playing golf.

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And now to find that Miss Springer works here—"

Hinschelman shook his head, dissatisfied. "His mother couldn't just *ask* the kid where he gets it?"

"Oh, no. Modern psychology forbids it. To ask where he gets the money would be not only a sign of distrust but an encroachment on his privacy."

"Oh, my—oh, for—and you believe that?"

"Not exactly," chuckled Seal.

"Me, I'd have it out of him in fifteen seconds," spat Hinschelman in disgust. "She couldn't call up the school and ask them?"

"She prefers not to. It could be the initial manifestation of, say, kleptomania, in which case she wants nothing known of it for the boy's sake, and in which case she'd seek more discreet professional help."

"And how do you plan to go about it?"

"I'm not sure yet. Miss Springer has now reared her shampooed head."

Hinschelman cracked his knuckles. "Well, Inspector, maybe it's your lucky day—me running into you here in the park."

"How is that?" queried Seal.

"You have a thing going for this Miss Springer, right? You're having her over for dinner tonight. You don't hardly want her to see you crawling around in that candy store. Six-feet-two and distinguished mustache and two-hundred-dollar sports jacket, you might not blend in."

"I've been pondering that."

"Sweat no more, Inspector. I'd kind of like to do something legal. Anyway, I wouldn't even be here, out of Bagwell State Pen, if it hadn't of been for you getting me a job and going to bat for me."

"Or been in it," appended Seal, who had twice abridged his friend's freedom.

"Oh, I'd of been there all right. I was in and out while you were still playing polo. But it was you got me going straight. I'll do the candy store."

Seal was touched. "Thoughtful of you, Aaron. If you could get a line on his purchases, note the denomination with which he makes payment—"

"No problem. I'd of wandered over anyway. That fat guy at the door, I've seen him somewhere and it's bugging me." He rose. "You say Billy's wearing a red suit and cap, blond hair?"

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"Beanie cap, celluloid propeller. I believe they're coming out for recess right now."

Hinschelman left, and from the red door issued half a hundred shrieking children. On the school's narrow concrete forecourt the handyman coerced them into a hand-holding column of twos. Would Miss Springer present herself to escort them? She did not. From the column's head the man appraised them sourly, barked a muffled command, and off they trooped behind him, gaggling like geese—out the gate and down the sidewalk to the candy store. Were they *all* filching money at that tender age?

At City Hall the clock struck two. My *God,* thought Seal, and vaulted to his feet as though kicked upright. At two—at this minute—he had an appointment for an eye examination, a booking he'd sought for ten days. He turned and walked quickly uphill, striding rhythmically, he soon found, for a new class in geography had begun and *Anchors Aweigh* drummed him forward. He could not seem to disentangle his long legs from the march's beat or the brisk Prussian commands of Miss Springer. ". . . THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT* DUM AND DAH AND DEE . . ." I am *march*ing, Seal discovered, horrified.

He skipped militarily out of step; he quickened his own cadence. Bloody little William anyway; what *was* this, skulking about after someone two feet tall with a celluloid propeller atop his skull? When would they begin to respect his retirement? *He* did not barge around asking the free services of his casual friends.

On he hurried, grumbling discontent, miffed at the collision of his romantic interest and the mysterious peculations of a five-year-old . . .

". . . And so, well, the marriage 'didn't work out,' as they say, and I took back my own name and went off for study in Europe and came home decided on teaching, and here I am," concluded Miss Springer.

Seal, his eyes bleary, nodded understanding. The venue was his brownstone on Crown Street, above the park. He was not yet comfortably used to its grandeur. A wealthy aunt had died, willing him the two-story house, eighteen potted plants, and the money that made possible his early retirement. Side by side, in twin easy chairs, they dwelt on the lights of the city. Behind them a marble staircase coiled upward. Around them was the good aroma of

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gourmet cooking from the skilled hands of a borrowed maid.

"The brass plate on your door reads Creighton T. Seal, C.I.E. What is that?"

"Chief Inspector Emeritus," he answered. "An honor they gave me when I retired."

She changed the subject. "You mentioned your late wife. Should I ask how—?"

Seal, the pupils of his eyes still dilated and useless from the drops (dammit, he must be allergic to them), struggled to pour a second Scotch into their glasses. "She died in India," he said. Scotch flowed down his hand and up a shirt sleeve. "She fell off an elephant."

Her gasp did not seem genuine. Nothing was right, he thought. She'd been two hours late getting here (it was nearly nine) and had offered no apology. He could not see anything. Observing her from close range made his head ache. Eyes squinting, he groped for her hand with a highball glass and said, "How did you settle on the Peter Pan School?"

"So revolutionarily progressive," she answered. "Dr. Grivas' own method. Where else will you find kindergarten-age children reading and writing after two months?"

"And what is the method?"

"But I've said twice I don't want to talk about it. I work hard all day and when I leave the school I leave it."

"My apologies." Not that he felt apologetic. Disgruntlement was more his mood. She was not the Miss Springer of a month ago. On that occasion, over drinks and red wine at the Italian restaurant, she had warmth and sparkle and had amused him with a cascade of fey chatter. It contrasted ill with her lacquered rigidity of tonight, her reluctance to accept his invitation, her blitheness as she floated in two hours late. Grudgingly he deferred to Hinschelman: she was some kind of fire-breathing liberal and he was a cop.

True, he hadn't, on that first evening, told her; each had paid decorous heed to the other's privacy, as if questions would sanction counterquestions. It was while walking with him to his car that a patrolman tipped his cap and said, "Good evening, Inspector." Abruptly she'd recalled a forgotten engagement; she'd insisted on taking a cab.

Or had he now antagonized her, by probing and asking questions, hoping he might turn her in the direction of William

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Wagner? Once a cop— He pleaded guilty. Here was his choice: pursuit of such romantic endeavor as his Chief Inspectorship had for many years precluded, or the solution of a kiddie crime. Repeatedly he chose the latter. Always a cop . . . "I could never do that," he said.

"Do what?"

"Compartmentalize my life. Leave the office and let a curtain drop. My work went with me night and day."

"Yes, you've made that quite obvious," she said.

"Obvious?"

"Grilling me, asking me questions."

"My dear, you know perfectly well I'm retired."

"Oh, come off it, C.I.E. You contradict yourself. A month, five weeks ago, your work followed you 'night and day.' Has retirement, in this short time, erased all your keyhole instincts and tendencies?"

Part of him bristled. He had mooned about over this razor blade? "I saw the children leaving school as I met you yesterday. I thought them charming. I'm interested in many things. I showed interest in your work. If that's prying—"

"It is when you're this insistent. Dr. Grivas has spent his adult life perfecting a radically new educational method. It's now getting its first full test. He is not about to have his record ruined by a bunch of half-informed, ignorant-rich parents jerking their children out of Peter Pan in mid-term out of some stone-age seizure of horror at 'something new.' He does not want his method bandied about or misrepresented at this time. He'd fire me in five minutes, he'd *strangle* me, can't you understand?"

"Severe payment," murmured Seal, again squinting to try to improve his blurred vision. The phone rang. He fumbled for it on the table beside his chair. He said, "Yes," and then, "Oh, my God," and then, "Yes, right away." He replaced the phone and stared blankly at his feet.

"Bad news?" asked Miss Springer.

"Quite bad," he said, standing. "A friend—gravely hurt in an—an accident."

"Not dead?"

Seal, mind deadened, scarcely heard her. "What?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Yes, you must go to him right away."

"I can't see to drive. I'll get a taxi and drop you home."

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Miss Springer would not hear of it. Suddenly she'd remembered an engagement. She would take her own cab.

On the sidewalk he apologized profusely. Their goodbyes were polite.

The woman named Louise Potchernik led him through an ugly fourth-floor room to the doorway of the bedroom where Hinschelman lay. His face was pale, his eyes were closed. He was heavily bandaged around the left shoulder and upper trunk.

"He's had a hypo," she said. "He'll be out for four or five hours. I ran straight for Dr. Mendez. He just lives down the block."

Yes, Mendez. Unfrocked and delicensed on an illegal abortion count, but a competent doctor with a brisk underworld trade.

She said, "Nobody else I dared go to with Hinsch on parole. One reason Hinsch kept mumbling your name, I guess. Thought you might help if the cops came."

"But they haven't."

She shook her head. "Listen, I got a mop and bucket of water and washed blood off the stairway and clear down to Blake Street between those old empty condemned warehouses where it happened."

"What did happen?"

"Shot twice, shoulder and chest. Mendez said another two inches and—"

"No, I mean from the start."

"First he came home. Eight-twenty or so. Started to phone you but remembered you had an engagement. Had some things to tell you. Said something about a candy store and then, talking more like to himself than to me, said, 'every *one* of those kids had a brand-new quarter.' Couldn't seem to get over that, whatever it meant. Said to tell you that 'in case something happens,' the stuff came from the schoolhouse."

"He went into that school?" asked Seal incredulously.

"Some school somewhere. He talks to himself a lot more than to me. I think it's a habit from prison."

"And then?"

"I fixed supper, we ate, and he went downstairs and down Blake Street towards this deli to get a six-pack and cigarettes. The next I knew was hearing him moaning from half a flight down. He doesn't weigh but a hundred and fifteen. I got him up here and ran for Mendez."

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"Could he tell you anything?"

"Mendez?"

"Hinsch."

"Pretty delirious. Came to, passed out, and so on. Said your name, 'Seal,' and then 'dark' over and over again. That really scared me, that 'dark.' Said 'room,' and then 'dark' again. And said another thing—I had to bend down to make it out. Said 'Bullfrog.' "

"Bullfrog?"

"That's all," she said. "Here's these things for you." From beneath a soiled sofa cushion she withdrew certain sheets of paper, seemingly a mimeographed list. She handed him two mounted film slides. "Here's something else. The bullet Mendez dug out of him. Says it's from a .32 pistol."

The feel of it was .32, but Seal could not adjust his eyes to it or to the print on the mimeographed pages. He rose and walked back to the man's bedside and leaned to hear his labored breathing. "He was helping me," he said, "but I never wanted him going into that school."

"Yeah, but you know Hinsch. Show him a door with a fool-proof lock on it and give him enough reason—and always talking about owing you so much."

"Not that much," Seal said, and pocketed what she had given him. "I'll look into it. I'll straighten it out."

"We might have to move him. Someone around that school must have seen him. I can't have the police here."

"Call me. Don't say anything. Just say he was on his way for cigarettes and got shot."

He picked at a filet off the warmer and, eyes functionless, went to bed. Visions of Hinschelman followed him. He'd gone scrambling off at the critical moment, leaving Fingers to do his dirty work. How long might the man have waited for him, or how many times had he telephoned? And he was unreachable, of course—seeing the optometrist, shopping about for exotic viands for the strange Miss Springer. While he awaited her, cocktail apparatus ready, Hinschelman, in his misguided fervor, got into and out of the Peter Pan School, bringing booty of questionable importance. While Seal and Miss Springer sipped drinks and crossed conversational hatpins, someone found Hinsch with two rounds of a .32.

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And Miss Springer? Where did the shoots of her belligerence lead? Or her almost paranoiac defensiveness? Love of Grivas, fear of Grivas, loathing of Seal as an ex-cop?

And what about Grivas carrying an antique box camera around?

Working the night shift at headquarters was one Lieutenant Gibbet, a close-mouthed young officer whom Seal had trained. From his bedside telephone he called him, asking any information on anyone in the files known as "Bullfrog." Gibbet did not recognize the name, he'd ring him back.

"BEBO OGOLOGO SENDS
HIS THANKS!!"

The caption, in urgent boldface, was under the touching photo of a potbellied, hollow-eyed African child. Following was the quarter-page advertisement on a page of *Family Way*, one of a half ton of female magazines left in a storeroom by Aunt Grace. There ensued (translated from the Swahili) this letter:

"Before you, dear Mrs. Bernice Borkey of Trestle Glen, Idaho, USA, I could not went to school. Here is picture. Wind blow hut away and flood take mealie plot and I every day find grubworms and lizard for sick sister eat and boil *posho*—our only sheep die heart water. Find berries and wart-hog curds. Wear leaves and no doctor for sister dying, *baya sana!* (Very bad). Then you have adopt us now new hut and littles barley meal for eat and scabs better since you send money."

A plea from Foster Children International followed. Would *you* turn *your* back on the tens of thousands of Bebo Ogologos dying of malnutrition and hopelessness in every land? Twenty-five dollars monthly (less than you now spent for cigarettes or a 'night on the town') offered you the rewarding knowledge that you kept a Bebo alive. Your orphan would write personal letters and send snapshots, as did Bebo . . . *"WILL YOU HELP?"*

Seal tossed the magazine aside, tested his improved vision on the city skyline, and picked up the ringing phone. Respectfully a man asked if he would hold the line for Captain Stout of Detectives.

"Certainly," Seal answered and, once on the "hold" button, hung up. A worn gag of Stout's, prefatory to a jocular harpoon. The phone rang again. He let it ring while he thought. He knew now who "Bullfrog" was but he couldn't tell them. Pull in Bullfrog and they'd nail Hinschelman with a housebreaking—five years in

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any courtroom with his past. On the twelfth ring he answered.

"Ah, Inspector," Stout said, buoyant as an airline ticket girl.

"Stout."

"Thought you might have a comment on your boy Hinschelman, who's just made the charts again."

"Bad connection. Can hardly hear you."

"Aaron. Fingers. Little excitement around here; we had a pool running on how long he'd keep out of trouble effective the date you soft-hearted him out of the pen."

"What kind of trouble?"

"We voted to ask you. You were seen coming in and then going out, by taxi number, last night."

"Wonder who saw that?"

"Didn't give name. Called us around midnight. Spoke of you and said Hinschelman got himself shot."

"So what's this, your quarter-hour coffee break?"

"Boys took a second vote, decided you might know where he is. We got there, nobody home. Pretty slobby job of swabbing blood off that stairway and clearing out the medic smells. Ex-Doctor Mendez came to mind. Fancy Mendez being missing, too."

"Unbelievable," Seal said. "So someone shot Fingers, you say. That's your charge, his getting shot? Or is it 'not being home at night?' "

"Charge is being good old Hinschelman with a record as long as New Year's morning. Boys wanted me to call you. They're having trouble picturing someone just walking up and shooting Hinschelman without provocation."

"Then you need some new boys. Everybody down there knows he dropped me information." Seal laughed. "Provocation? Without Hinsch you'd have a dozen unsolved jewelry heists on your hands."

"They asked me when he last dropped you information."

"Tell them I don't know. I had drops in my eyes yesterday and they clouded my memory. Tell the boys this: ever since Bagwell State he's been working as timekeeper on the midnight shift at Plynx Automotive. Call his super if you don't think he's straight."

"Straight as the pool cue of a hustler's mark. We'll know when we pick up the guy that shot him."

"Yes, don't forget him in your hilarity. While you're laughing he might be gunning down someone else. Funny thing about that nameless phone call when you come to think about it. I got word

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around nine and went out for the straight story, which is that Hinsch was on the way to a store for some cigarettes. Someone, your party, went to all the trouble of writing down my cab number. Odd hobby, wouldn't you think? Or maybe he just likes to collect cab numbers. Makes phone calls, too. Along about midnight he got around to phoning you."

Stout answered less jovially. "More than you did."

"Yes, but three long hours later. Think it might be they held off until they learned the assassination had aborted and Hinsch was out of range? Pretend—you and the boys—that they knew of his parolee status and were settling for his reconsignment to the pen."

"We'd still want to know 'Why?' We'll find out. We're all tired of Hinschelman. Nobody favored releasing him but you."

"Me, the warden, and the parole board."

"Yeah, invite them all over, drink some warm beer. You'll keep us posted, naturally."

"I always do," smiled Seal.

He returned to the arcana that Fingers had lifted from the school. Straddling a heap of minor mysteries was the reasoning behind the theft of these things. On the film slides were microscopic rows of scriptography, indecipherable without a projector. Mimeographed were alphabetical rosters ('N' into 'O') torn at random from a loose-leaf notebook listing donors and foreign foster children of the charity fund. He read the five pages. Here, in the orphan column, might be something worth driving over to his Uncle Malcolm's about.

He was folding the pages when a penciled notation on the back of one caught his eye. It was in Hinschelman's handwriting. It said: "Ubiquity Mailing Service, San Francisco." Miss Springer had mailed a package to that address. He opened his address book and dialed a San Francisco friend.

". . . ALL IN *STEP* NOW, THIS IS *RUSS*IA, ONE AND TWO AND *LEN*INGRAD; CAREFUL, KEVIN, WATCH THE *NORTH* SEA, NO WET *FEET* AND *HUP* TWO THREE . . ."

"What in God's name?" asked Stout.

"Nursery school over there," the Inspector said. This park bench was well back, farther back than yesterday's, behind the oleander bushes near the bandstand.

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"Well, they're busting a city ordinance, all that noise."

"They may be busting more than that."

"What does that mean? What are you up to anyway, getting me out here in the woods?"

"You wanted information on Hinschelman."

"You found him?" Stout asked.

"No, and wouldn't tell you—yet—if I had. Got something better. He was shot out of that warehouse door by a hood named James T. Keech, alias Bullfrog. You don't know him—he filtered down here after four years at Bagwell State, where he seems to have been a contemporary of Hinschelman's. Nice book on Bullfrog. Armed robbery, assault with deadly weapon—"

"Friend of Hinschelman's—"

"Wrong. Hinsch didn't know him but had seen him somewhere and remembered the face. Ergo, Keech didn't know Fingers until yesterday, which recognition he celebrated by ambushing him with a .32." He handed the spent round to Stout.

"We call that withholding evidence."

"How withholding? I just gave it to you."

"You know, sometimes you just make me squirm," Stout said. "And you wouldn't possibly be able to describe this guy or help us out on where he is."

"Can do both with the greatest precision, once we get a thing or two straightened out."

"I knew there was a catch. Get on with it. I can't sit out here all day for some cheap grifter."

"I may offer you something bigger."

Stout mouthed his cigar. "Wonder what it is about that word 'offer,' when you say it, that comes on like a hyena eating glue? What's the deal?"

"Immunity for Hinschelman."

"Doesn't need it. You said he's straight."

"Anything he did I asked him to do."

"Go to hell, Seal. You're retired, you've got no authority to do anything or have anyone else do it for you."

"Subject is a five-year-old boy, Captain. You want it?"

Stout massaged his round face. Cigar ashes dropped to his tie.

"The two things are interlinked," Seal went on. "What Hinsch did for me and the shooting. I tell you that Keech acted under orders, and I ask who of any stature would risk killing a small-time pickpocket unless something of importance was involved."

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"Keep talking."

"I sent Hinschelman into a building for some information. Someone apparently saw him there, but nothing was done about it on the site. Your desk says they never called you. An hour or so later Keech shot him. The place Hinschelman entered employs, for the most dubious reasons, Keech."

Stout spoke as the wind changed. ". . . MEXICO AND *YUCA*-TAN AND ONE AND *TWO* AND . . ." "I said what's this touchy institution?" Stout bellowed.

"You're hearing it from that window right ahead of you. The Peter Pan Nursery and Reading School."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," groaned Stout and stood up. "I'm going home."

Seal pulled him back by an arm. "Sit down. You want a coast-to-coast AP story or don't you? We've already got an unregenerate hood running loose in a houseful of kindergartners from the best homes in town, and that doesn't pique your cement head? There's a lot more going on in there than a nursery school."

Seal rose to peer over the oleander bush. Keech was guarding the door, but Grivas' car hadn't arrived.

"And what is that?" Stout said wearily.

"Thing called Foster Children International."

Stout stared at him. "Antoine Grivas? You're out of your mind. Mess with him and you'll have every women's club in the country after your scalp?"

"Better now than a million dollars later."

"I've got five more minutes. Go on."

He began with Billy Wagner and progressed to Miss Springer and then to Hinschelman. He dwelt on the strange behavior of the woman. "I'm waiting for one particular portion of the geography drill she's giving, then I'll be sure." He told of the phone call last night. "She said, 'Not dead?' and then 'Yes, you must go to him.' Unusual things to say, just as if she'd been sitting there expecting it. 'I'd said 'a friend,' not 'her' or 'him.' "

Seal paused, signaling silence. Stout eyed his wrist watch. "Go ahead."

"I'm listening," Seal said, "we're getting to it. Here it is."

". . . *HERE* WE GO NOW, *ROUND* THE WORLD, *ROUND* AND *MARCH*ING, *THREE* AND *FOUR; FAST*ER, WILLIAM, THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT,* REUBEN, *GREECE* IS NEXT AND *HUP* AND

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TWO AND THREE AND FOUR . . ."

Like a cat by a fireplace, Seal stretched, smiling. "Susan missed France yesterday. Missed it twice, once while she was clear out of the room on the way to the candy store. I missed it because I was racing to the eye doctor."

"Brain doctor's where you should've gone. I don't get a thing."

"It's a tape," Seal said. "It's not the innocent geography class that passersby are supposed to think it is. I now submit this bizarre document from those premises—a list of the donors to Foster Children International and opposite each the name and location of his-or-her respective adoptee. Notice these foreign villages: you've never heard of a single one of them!

"I paid a call on my rich Uncle Malcolm who spent twenty-five years junketing for *National Geographic* and has notes and maps that money can't buy. They exist, all right, these villages, but they've all got one thing in common: they're unreachable unless you have a helicopter or a dogsled. If not in ten-thousand-foot mountains they're deep in some primeval swamp or buried among Amazon headhunters or in forests you couldn't get a bulldozer through. Their one and only contact with the outside world is the mail burro or outrigger or native runner, whose arrival sets off two weeks of bonfires and tribal dancing."

"And what do you plan to do, relocate them?"

"Wake up, Jonathan. Say you 'adopt' one of these infants and, as time passes, get sentimental enough to go voyaging off for an in-person interview in his mudhole. Impossible. Conveniently so. That gets us to another murky area. Every school day a parcel goes out of that nursery addressed to Ubiquity Mailing Service in San Francisco. I found out what Ubiquity is. Ubiquity will, for a healthy fee, see that mail is remailed to an addressee bearing the postmark of any town, village, igloo, or cliff dwelling on earth. They do a brisk trade for practical jokers, college kids, 'missing' husbands, and such as play games with the F.B.I."

Stout chewed his thumbnail. "I am catching a gamey odor."

"Smell these film slides. No use trying to read them without a projector. Uncle Malcolm has one and knows some languages. This is his translation from Pakistani." He handed a typewritten page to the Captain. Stout read it and rubbed his beefy neck.

"If you're wrong I'll be selling shoelaces."

Seal peered over the oleander bush. "You've been saying that for twenty years."

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"Support me and my family on your aunt's will if you're wrong?"

"When was I ever wrong, Jonathan? Better that we work fast. There'll be a ton of evidence in that building and Grivas hasn't showed up yet. Phone them to bring you a warrant, and we'll need four or five men."

Two men neutralized Keech in a quick pincers movement, taking his .32 away, silencing him before he could shout an alarm. In the unoccupied business office Seal went for the carton sealed and destined for Ubiquity Mailing, broke it open, and extracted the top envelope. The paper was of the poorest quality; it was sealed but unstamped, and addressed to a matron in Alabama with return address: Carla Pupin of Plensknik, Yugoslavia. The writing on the envelope and enclosed letter was in a child's wandering scrawl. A fuzzy snapshot of a small girl was inside. On a bookcase Seal found a jar of mint-new quarters.

They left Officer Wode there and bypassed the empty geography room, leaving the tape recorder playing. Beneath an unlit red light ahead was the door to the "dark . . . room" referred to by a delirious Hinschelman. Inside Seal turned a light on and sidled down the line of prints paper-clipped to a horizontal wire.

"Pictures of slum kids, every one of them," Stout said. 'I've seen some of these kids in the Fifteenth Ward. Terrible prints, aren't they? And this guy's a professional photographer?"

"Done poorly on purpose," said Seal. "Uses a six-dollar camera, prints them amateurishly. What other kind of photography would there be in North Rucksack, Paraguay?"

Stout shook his head, still doubtful. "Suppose they *mail* him the undeveloped negatives from all those places?"

"You sure die hard," said Seal. "Come along."

He took Stout down the wide hall festooned with crayoned cutouts and toward a door at the end of a corridor. Behind them the recorder receded and a new voice was heard—that of the real Miss Springer.

The door was at the left rear of a large classroom. A foot-square tinted window gave them vantage.

"It beats anything," Stout murmured, looking in. "Anything I ever saw."

Her back was to them. All about her at their tiny desks toiled fifty children, heads bent, tongues writhing, feet tangling with

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chairlegs, and knuckles white on their pencils as they copied from the three projection screens ahead. Three projectors at the rear wall threw three images of handwritten letters in three foreign languages. The calligraphy was round and flowing, easily copiable. Two aisles separated the class into three sections, each assigned its respective screen as copy fodder.

Now Miss Springer bent over Billy Wagner and smiled approval, walked on, then bent to assist a small girl.

"Know Italian or Burmese?" Seal asked.

"Know Spanish," answered Stout. "It says, *'Estimada Senora.'* Then it's blank.

"They fill that in to order," Seal said.

"Says: 'My name is Mateo. Here is picture. I am live in little pueblo of Saenz in Chile with my brother. I go to school now with you send money. I have dog name Lobo. When you send so kind have coat for winter and . . .'"

His voice faded. "They copy it in the foreign language without knowing the meaning of a single word."

Seal nodded. "Keeps them from babbling about it at home. Grivas runs ad, receives contributions, has the children copy letters and address envelopes, adds snapshots, and off they go to Ubiquity Mailing Service to be postmarked in towns halfway around the world."

"And pays each kid a quarter a day."

"Rewards them, let's say. Cuts down overhead. Figure two letters per afternoon by fifty children—that comes to five hundred letters a week. Times twenty-five dollars a month per contributor gives them a $50,000-a-month sucker list."

"Minimum," Stout said grimly.

The door suddenly flew open and closed behind a livid Miss Springer.

She said, "Look, you keyhole creep, can't you understand I'm not interested? What do you want now?"

Seal smiled at her. "You."

They were walking her to the front door when Antoine Grivas entered. A white carnation graced the left lapel of his imported suit; his shoes were English saddle leather; he carried a bulging brief case and a Brownie camera.

"Two bits a day," mused Hinschelman, "and those shysters taking home five figures a month."

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They had found him and returned him to his own billet via ambulance. "I still don't understand all that noise we heard."

"The recorder? Oh, they had their regular morning curriculum," Seal answered. "Or enough to satisfy enough parents. It was afternoons that were given over to the illegalities, and the recorder backed up Keech's reasons for keeping people out of there—classes in session. His function was to guard that door."

Hinschelman wagged his head in admiration. "You're something all right, making sense out of all that junk I brought you. Didn't know what I was taking. Was looking through the front office and heard footsteps and just grabbed the first things I could. How did I know Keech slept in the place? I beat him out the front door but he must have followed me home."

"And phoned Grivas for instructions while you ate supper. She lived with him, and hadn't yet left for my place, so she knew what had happened."

"How'd she connect us?"

"Saw us on that park bench together. So did Keech."

"I played dead. It wasn't hard. I lay there and he came out of that doorway and searched my pockets, not that he knew I'd taken anything. I looked up when he was walking off and recognized him under a street lamp." His eyes closed. "Some racket. Now Billy doesn't get his quarter any more."

"Billy will now live within his allowance, which is a nickel a week."

"And you're without a girl friend."

"Never had one, as you wisely suggested."

"Maybe I can find you someone nice," said Louise.

"Please don't," urged Inspector Seal.

"Q"

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Florence V. Mayberry

A Goodbye Sound

Florence V. Mayberry has that rare quality of being able to get under the skin of her characters—and under the skin of her readers, too. Here again is the Nevada scene she knows so well, with its curious mixture of sentiment and realism. A voice in the mind, and bittersweet thoughts . . .

"Shut up, Joe," I said. "You bore me."

Joe looked as if he would cry. I can't stand a man who goes around all the time looking as if he could cry. Joe's that kind.

"Well—" He cleared his throat, a nasty, fluttering sound. It was too bad, I knew it was wrong, but Joe couldn't take a deep breath without irritating me. "Why can't you look at me like you do at everybody else? Like just smile nice at me sometimes. Like for instance you don't even know those guys standing over there, they're just waiting for a table and you never saw them before, just happened to look their way. And you give 'em a big smile like you were the hostess out here." A hesitation. "Or maybe you do know them."

"Whether I do or not is not your affair. Now listen, Joe, you've been after me to go out with you for months. So I'm out. With you. So why not cool it, lay off the witness-box stuff."

"Sure, okay, Lolly."

"Laura!"

"Okay, Laura."

What's a woman to do with a man like that? *Roll over and play dead, Joe, sit up and beg, Joe, fetch me my slippers, Joe.*

"Order anything you like, hon, the world's yours tonight."

"The prime ribs, please."

"Yeah, that's good, that's the ticket, best thing on the menu. Hon, you can have prime ribs every day, every night, if you'd only want it that way. I just finished a quarter-million-dollar contract,

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Lol—Laura. Your old man—" He choked it off, trying to laugh. "I mean your old ex-husband is in the bigtime contracting now. Kept slogging along until I made it."

"Maybe I ought to go back in court and try for alimony this time. First time it would have been like suing a four-year old kid for his nickels." *That's right, ruin his fun, be mean, you shrew.*

"I told you, if you'd only hang on a little while, maybe make me feel like I was something, I'd make it." He tried to laugh again, but it was like the laugh was hiding behind a door, afraid to come out. "I'm slow, hon. But right along with that, I'm too dumb to know how to give up."

That was for sure. He's telling me? Divorced two years and every week, regular as clockwork Joe telephoned. *Hon, let's try it again, willya, Lolly, willya just go out to dinner with me and talk a while? I get terrible lonesome, you gotta eat anyway. Hon, do you need any money, I gotta few bucks ahead, construction's picking up. Hon, hon,* over and over. So once in a while I gave in, like throwing a dog a bone. Damn a man like that. Who needs his money? I make plenty doing beauty work.

"Prime ribs for the lady. Medium-rare, same as usual, hon? Baked potatoes, all the fixings. Same for me. Don't give the lady no coffee till later, she drinks it with dessert. That still right, hon?"

A crawly feeling shivered my back, crept into my jaw. My teeth started to chatter. Nerves, I mean, like before a fit.

The food came, beautiful stuff because we were at Eugene's where it's maybe the best in Reno, but I looked at it like it was poison. Joe did that to me, always. He didn't mean to, but he did. Slender I always was, but by the time Joe and I broke up I was nothing but skinny. Chemical reaction, maybe. Or maybe I'm just mean. But I think it's more than that. I'm a one-man woman.

I never should have married Joe. My fault, of course, because I knew I shouldn't and he didn't. That's why I stuck it out with him for three years and then let him hang around these past two years. No woman ought to marry a man when she loves someone else she can't have.

"Joe, are you still smacking your mouth after every swallow? You come to a swell place like this and still eat like you're in a truck-stop diner."

"Sorry, Lol—Laura. Hon, I keep telling you, I need a nice woman to shape me up, make something out of me. All I do any

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more is hang around with guys. Honest, Laura, you're the only one. I tried going out with other women but it's no use. Not after you."

See what I mean? What he should have done was reach that big paw of his across the table, smack me hard, and walk out. Never phone again. And I tell you, that would have been a big relief, no more anticipating that call every week, trying to think up new ways to say no.

"Eat up, hon, come on, tear into that meat. Or you'll get skinny again, like you were after—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Joe."

"You should of kept the baby, Laura, maybe that's what turned you bitter. I wouldn't of cared it wasn't mine, anything yours is mine far as I'm concerned. You should never have—"

"Damn you to hell!" Whispered, so the tables around couldn't hear. "You dumb stubborn ox, you still believe I'm a murderer! That I deliberately killed my darling baby, my poor lost baby! How many times do I need to tell you I *wanted* that baby?"

"Well, hon, I wouldn't of cared it wasn't mine. I told you that when you told me about it, right from the start. You were honest with me, and I said if it's yours, why, I'd love it no matter who it looked like."

Maybe now you won't keep thinking I'm the witch you started out thinking I was. Who wouldn't act like a witch, getting reminded every day that I loved someone I couldn't have? Besides hanging onto the conviction I had murdered my unborn baby. It was a miscarriage, not an abortion. Joe was determined not to believe that, perhaps in the hope that I had deliberately rid myself of my last attachment to Chris. Well, he was wrong. It was a miscarriage. My baby's silly mother cried too much.

"I like Chris myself, Laura, I wouldn't of cared. Because I understood why you went for the guy, you just a green kid and him knowing how to handle women. Only when you found out he was married you should of broke it off. But that's the trouble, women get took in by a good line, him throwing money around, regular guys don't have a chance."

"Joe, I have to go. I don't feel well."

"Aw, hon, we barely started eating—"

"You stay, Joe. Eat yours and mine, too. And don't call me again. Ever. Just leave me alone." I got up, skimmed past the tables and waiters, fast.

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It felt good in the open air, a nice warm night, the moon big and bright. The white clean moonshine seemed to shower me off, wipe away what Joe stirred up, and I stopped wanting to cry. Nevada's moon, I think, must be the most beautiful on earth, so brilliant, so white. I felt like diving into its glow, swimming in it.

"You're moon mad," Chris used to tell me. Then he would say in his soft, gentle voice, slurred by a Danish accent, "So am I, little Laura, when I see you in the moonlight and hold you in my arms." How many millions of men have said those same dumb words to how many millions of dumb girls? So it wasn't the words, it was the way Chris said it.

A taxi moved up to me, ready for a passenger. I opened the door and got in. But I couldn't close the door because Joe was holding it, all 200 pounds of him. "Hon, why take a cab when I gotta car? I'll pay the guy his fare, he won't lose nothing. Listen, hon, you gotta eat something—Listen, fella, I'm not taking your fare, here's a couple bucks, come on, Lol—Laura."

Two couples going inside the restaurant stared at us. One of the women looked like a customer of the beauty salon where I worked. And it was so dumb, squabbling in front of Eugene's. So I got out and let Joe lead me to his big car. A good one but all dusty, with rope and a can of oil in the back, and papers, chewing-gum wrappers, and gravel on the floor in front.

"I know what you're thinking, Laura, didn't wash his car before he picked me up. Well, hon, I been out on the job, way off the paved roads, in soft dirt. So I got to carry extra oil and a rope in case. And I barely got back tonight, tore back like crazy, didn't want to disappoint you, hahaha!"

The poor guy. Oh, God, the poor guy.

"How about a little run up to Virginia City, hon? It's warm down here tonight, be cooler up there. Those old ghosts chill the place off, huh, hahaha!"

"Okay."

Might as well. I wasn't going to get rid of Joe any more than you can break a bulldog's hold on something he's locked his jaws on by smacking his rump. I switched on the car radio, the knobs gritty under my fingers, put it on loud so Joe would need to shout to be heard; a man can't shout forever.

Lovely music, a great "mood" program, bittersweet, haunting. It drowned out Joe and I spun out with it, far out. It was easy to forget it was Joe beside me, he was merely a broad-shouldered

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male figure. But pretty soon, dreaming with the music, he was more than that. He was Chris.

Chris beside me while we zoomed along, not toward Virginia City but toward Carson City and Lake Tahoe. Five years ago. A time when I barely knew Joe—he was only one of the men who worked for Chris. Once in a while we would bump into him and other employees of Chris in some night spot. And they would all cluster around Chris as if he were a magnet and they were iron filings. The same way I did.

I try and try to figure out why Chris was so attractive to everyone. But I never can put it in words. He simply was. Sitting beside him could put me on a cloud, soft and gentle, yet somehow firm and secure at the same time. His voice was so tender. Once I heard him speak when he was angry, not to me but to a stranger who tried to dance with me. Even then his voice was tender, a velvet-covered steel trap closing gently, but unstoppably, around the man.

In size he wasn't as big as Joe. But he exuded a mountain feeling, a mountain covered with grass and the sun streaming over it. A dopey woman in love? True. Absolutely true.

Joe shouted over the music and drove away Chris and my dream. "How about you and me trying it again, Laura, whaddaya say? You're acting like you're a million miles away. Put your mind on me a little bit, hon."

"Joe, turn around. I don't want to go up to Virginia City. Tomorrow's a big day at the beauty shop and we're shorthanded. Turn back to Reno at Steamboat Springs."

"Aw-w-w-w, hon! Just when I'm feeling good, you back beside me. Listen, take tomorrow off. I'll give you whatever it takes to make up your lost pay."

"I don't need your money, Joe."

"Please." His voice was uneven, shaky. "I need to be a little happy once in a while."

So I said, okay, okay, and we went up the steep climb from the valley, around the last bend, into Virginia City. Tourists ambled up and down the long main street, gawking at the store windows, going in and out of the fake oldtime saloons, laughing as if it was a ball, you know, gay like fun. And all the time it was nothing but an old dead town, faked up for dollars. It gave me the creeps. Like watching people laugh in a funeral parlor while they ogled a fancy old-fashioned coffin.

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We got out of the car and drifted with the crowd, Joe hanging onto my arm. But even with the crowd, with the tinpanny piano music coming out of a bar and Joe trying to make talk, I couldn't stop being back with Chris. The thought of him simply wouldn't go away. It wiped out Virginia City, Joe, everything.

Chris, darling, are we going to be married? Someday, I mean.

Little girl, don't worry, let me take care of that. Don't you worry your pretty head about that. I have problems. I need to handle those problems first.

I'm sorry to bother you, Chris, it's just I love you so. I suppose a girl shouldn't keep telling a man how much she loves him but it's the way I feel. I'm no good at pretending.

He had patted my hand then, tenderly, almost as a father would pat his daughter, and said that was why he loved me, my eyes so deep and true, they couldn't lie, nor those sweet lips—

"Wanta go inside one of the joints, Lol—hon? Have us a little fun?"

"Damn!" I said. "I'd as soon dance on somebody's grave."

Joe's jaw dropped and his eyes turned moist. Poor guy, poor guy. Why couldn't he just fade away, leave me alone?

"It's Chris," he finally said. "I can tell. You're thinking about Chris again. When you gonna get him out of your system? After the way he done you dirt."

"He didn't! I was twenty-one. I can take my own blame."

"Hon, you were nothing but a dumb little kid, barely twenty-one. What's twenty-one mean, it ain't magic. And Chris close to forty, smart, wheeling and dealing with Nevada's big shots, knowing all the angles."

"Take me home!"

"Okay, hon, have it your way. But I still think it was a damn shame, leaving you so mixed up you can't love nobody but him."

"Shut up, Joe!" *Shut up, shut up, shut up, why tell me what I know too well?* I'm like my great-grandmother and she was Indian, full-blooded. Outside I'm blonde as a Scandinavian, but inside of me I'm Indian. And Indians don't change loyalties easily; when they get set on an idea, that's it. Forever. At least that's what I've heard. Anyway, that's how I am. For me, Chris is it, and always will be.

Joe did what I said, shut up, led me back to the car, and we headed for Reno. The moonlight turned the night into a twilight, only more shimmering, just as it was the night Chris and I drove

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to Tahoe. Our last night together. I remembered I had leaned close to the windshield, let the moonlight bathe my face, smiled at Chris. So he drove off on a side road and took my face in his hands. "My beautiful little girl," he said.

"Yes, Chris."

He kissed me, then drew my face back to the windshield, into the moonlight. "No wonder you love moonlight, little Laura, you're moonbeams made flesh. This is how I want to remember you. Always."

Something was wrong about the way Chris said that. A strange inflection, a goodbye sound. As though he had dropped a pebble into a well that I had expected to be full, but there was no splash. Lost. Gone. A goodbye sound.

I swallowed hard to keep back a question about that, because something told me I didn't want the answer. I've heard, too, that Indians are psychic. Anyway, I didn't ask. I smiled instead. If some crazy thing was going to happen, if I was going to lose Chris, I didn't want him to remember ugliness.

Chris drove back to the highway, and that night I think we dropped into every nightspot around the Lake. Joe showed up in one of the clubs and then kept following us from place to place, hanging onto us like a burr. Truth is, Chris seemed to encourage him. He would have had to, otherwise Joe wouldn't have stayed. Chris knew how to get rid of people he didn't want around.

Once I whispered, "Tell Joe to get lost." But Chris only patted my hand and said, "Who can blame the man? He's in love with you. Who wouldn't be in love with you?"

Without any thought it popped out. "Maybe you wouldn't, Chris." Was that my Indian great-grandmother coming out in me, knowing the way all primitive people know?

We kept dancing, Chris silent. Finally he said, "Little girl, you've picked up the feeling of what I have to tell you tonight. Not all, but part. I do love you. But tonight is goodbye for us. Our last time together. That's why I want to remember your face, everything about you. Darling, it has to be. The end, I mean."

"Why?" It was a weak, strangled sound.

"I've learned in business, no use explaining. When the end comes, face it, quick, sharp, no turning back. It's simply I have too many involvements, business, everything. It won't work out." He bent and kissed my forehead.

My head floated up among the colored, spangly lights, my body

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a numbed automaton on the dance floor below. Then my head fell back on my body, and all of me was numb, too numb to be surprised that a smile had frozen on my face. Who wants to remember a tear-streaked face?

"Dance with Joe, little sweetheart, he's been waiting for that all evening," Chris said, when we went back to our table.

Joe stood up and looked at Chris as if he was going to lick his hand. My smile was still frozen as Joe led me back to the dance floor. Over his shoulder I watched Chris call the waiter, speak to him. Then he looked toward me, smiled, nodded his head approvingly, turned and left. Just left. That's all.

The numbness suddenly went away and I started falling into a black pit. I clung hard to Joe while I was doing it, and he squeezed back. "Aw, honey, what's this? Huh? You go for me a little bit?"

I shook my head.

"I sure wish you would, baby. Just a little, you know, like at least be friendly."

"Chris has left me," I said. "So I'm dead. Mind playing hearse and taking me home?" My voice sounded flat and far off, like someone else talking.

Joe's head swung toward our table. "You mean he's gone?" I nodded. A wide happy grin spread over his face. "Gone," he said with satisfaction. "Well, now let's you and me have some fun for ourselves. We don't care if—"

"I care," I said. "Please take me home."

Joe led me back to the table. The waiter came over and said, "The gentleman with you said to bring you anything you want, it's his party, all paid for."

"Laura, honey, the night's young. And for the first time, me with you, Chris doing this for us. It's like a dream, lemme dream a while."

"Take me home, Joe. Otherwise I'll call a cab."

Now, all these years later, I was telling him again, *Take me home, Joe.* Time hadn't changed anything.

We curved down the mountain from Virginia City, saw the valley spangled with lights, and Reno a shimmer of neon toward the north.

"Hon, didja hear what happened today? You musta, the way you're all sunk into yourself tonight."

"Hear what?"

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"Chris got divorced today."

It couldn't be true. It was a crazy made-up daydream, an idiot fantasy that fairy tales come true.

"His wife finally got onto him. Took him for a bundle."

Good. Take every dime. That way I can prove it's Chris I want, not money.

"I'm really sorry, Lol—Laura. Honest. You may of always thought I only cared about what I wanted. Like, only wanting to hang onto you. But honest, all along I felt bad for you, the way you were hook, line, and sinker for Chris. He wasn't worth all that, not that he ain't a great guy. That is, with guys. But not worth all that grief. From you."

"Well, you don't have to be sorry for me any longer, Joe." All the sad five years of waiting for something I never expected to get wiped out! Because here it was, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Laughter bubbled out of me—the first time I had laughed like that since Chris went away. "Not any more, Joe!"

"Gee, hon, that's great. Really great." I looked at Joe affectionately. He was kind, actually sweet, to be glad just because I was glad.

"You see, I was afraid you'd be all broke up. I mean, I figured you'd been holding onto the hope that someday you and Chris would finally make it. Then when he got his divorce today and right off married that kooky kid from New York. I mean, right today. I figured you'd take it hard."

The valley's lights went out. Blown out the way one blows out an oil lamp. When they came back on, they were blurred and my head was dizzy.

"But since you're taking it good like this, maybe I got a chance with you after all."

Keep talking, Joe, so I don't have to.

"Hon, I'll never stop loving you. You're so beautiful. I mean, looking at you sideways like now, you're like a beautiful statue or something. Honest, when I first saw you with Chris, it kinda made me sick, you so young and little and pretty."

To disinfect a wound, split it wide and rub salt in it. I may die from it, but the wound will be clean.

"Joe, is this true? Or are you making it up to try to make me forget Chris?"

He looked stunned. "Why would I make up a thing like that? Anyways, you could check, couldn't you? Oh, Lord, you're not tak-

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ing it cool after all. But you'd have to find out sometime. Honest, I thought maybe you'd already heard."

"How did you find out?"

"Hell, I do business with Chris. See him all the time. So today late, when I first got in from the job, I went to his office about something. And Chris invited me to the party he's throwing tonight, even introduced me to the kid he just married, she was there, that's how I know she's kooky, giggling and crawling all over Chris."

"Where's the party?"

"I'm not going. Gee, hon, think I'd take you home and run off to that party?"

"I'm going to the party. Take me, Joe."

"Now, listen, that's no good, you got a bad sound in your voice, you don't want—"

"Take me to the party, Joe."

"Hell!" Joe said.

The party was at the Mapes Hotel in a private suite, the door wide open, come-one-come-all, so we walked right in. Flowers were everywhere, in baskets, in vases, gift cards thrusting from them. The room smelled like a funeral. When my father died, the funeral parlor smelled exactly like this wedding party.

The guests, laughing, milling around, were only a moving color-dotted blur. And in the center of the blur was Chris, sharp and clear, with a small blur beside him that bounced and jiggled and swung on his arm. Chris looked just the same. Smiling, eyes blue as the sky after a good clean rain. Stocky, strong. And he saw me. As Joe and I came in, he was looking toward the door.

Chris dropped the bouncing blur off his arm and walked to us. He kept smiling. Smiles, I knew from five years before, don't really mean anything. "Hello, little girl," he said. "It's been a long time." Tender, loving voice. I had to bite my lips to keep them from trembling. "I hoped you would come to wish me happiness."

The small blur skipped over to us and caught hold of Chris. It shook its shaggy curls from its little heart-shaped face, came out of the blur, pursed its mouth into a pout, and asked, "Aren't you going to introduce wifey, hubby-doll-boy?"

Hubby-doll-boy introduced us. "Valerie, these are special friends, Laura and Joe Walker. You've already met Joe, remember? At the office. Joe used to work for me but now he's my competitor, a real great guy."

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Joe stepped forward, grinning, pleased. "Congratulations, you two. Yeah. May you look as good on your fiftieth anniversary."

"Oooo, super, isn't that darling, Chrissy, just super darling!" Valerie cooed.

Chris took my hand. It shouldn't have sent an electric shock through me. But it did. "And little Laura is a very special lady I've known a long time. A lovely *lady*." Emphasis on *lady*.

Valerie's big brown eyes narrowed as she looked me over. "Oooo, lovely, just simply lovely-lovely. Chrissy angel, kiss me, I've not been kissed for five whole minutes, m-m-m!" She stood on tiptoe, holding up her face, nuzzling the air. Chris bent and kissed her, red creeping over his face. "Mm-mm-mm, not that way, Daddy, big-big kiss!"

He kissed her again and she snuggled against him. Then he did it another time, on his own, a long hard kiss. He didn't have to do that. He could have waited until I couldn't see him.

I began to hear the voice. Not a real voice. Not mine or anybody's. Just a voice in my mind. It said, *I'm going to kill Chris, then I'll kill myself.* Flat, no anger, simply a fact.

I didn't argue with the voice. Why argue with what had to be? But I began to think, how? Should I use fingernails? The heel of my shoe? Hit him with a compact, stab him with a lipstick, choke him with a five-dollar bill? Those were my weapons.

Joe grabbed my arm and led me to the buffet spread. "Eat something, hon, you're kinda sick looking, you oughta eat something."

"Maybe some water."

"It ain't healthy not to eat."

No knives on the buffet table. Forks, but can a fork stab deep enough to kill? The cake cutter? Nothing but dull prongs.

My knees started to tremble and I went to a chair and sat down. A standup ashtray was beside the chair. Light metal, hollow inside. Put a bump on the head, nothing more. I tried to think what my Indian great-grandmother would have done. Latched onto some brave's bow and arrow, or a tomahawk. A shotgun, if one was around. But her great-granddaughter wouldn't know how to pull the trigger on a gun if one was in her lap.

Chris was watching me over the top of Valerie's shaggy little head. Still smiling, but not comfortable. Uneasy. I never saw Chris uneasy before. He turned his eyes away, too quickly. Guilty.

Joe touched my shoulder, leaned down and whispered, "Hon,

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don't keep staring at Chris that way, you're giving the guy the creeps. After all, it's his wedding night, he ought to be let to be happy."

Why, I wanted to ask, just why? But that would have taken strength. I wanted to save all my strength to do what I had to do, before Chris left. Already he and Valerie were going around to their guests, bidding good night, Valerie giggling, snuggling. Chris moving quickly, in a hurry, people making cracks about that. Finally they headed in my direction.

"Go away, Joe," I said. "This is between Chris and me."

"Now, Lol—Laura—"

"Go away."

He shuffled off miserably. Then the bridal couple came to me, the last one in the room. I stood up, my weapon ready. Say it loud, scream it. *Chris, you never saw our son. I grieved about losing him as well as his father. He never drew breath, but do you suppose in some other world he wonders what happened to his father and what made his mother cry so much?*

"Good night, Laura. Please wish us well."

I opened my mouth. "How—" *How does our son feel about us?* I swallowed. "How—how nice to see you again, Chris."

It wasn't easy, but I smiled. Smiles don't mean anything but they're not ugly. It's better not to remember ugliness. "I wish you well."

They turned, walked away, out of the room, out of my life. Gone. Would that be the same as dead?

Joe shuffled back. "Come on, hon, let's go, you look all in. Hey, maybe you could eat a hamburger or something now. You know I worry about you, Lol—Laura."

"Joe, don't waste your time and feelings on me."

His face screwed up like an ugly baby's who isn't sure whether to cry or not. "I wish I could stop. But some things you can't help."

I knew about that. That I understood.

"Okay, Joe. Buy me a hamburger."

So Joe and I went downstairs to the coffee shop and had hamburgers. Like maybe a funeral feast?

"Q"

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Edmund Crispin

Danger, Writer At Work

There are freelance writers who discipline themselves to work regular office hours, from nine to five. But what happens when outsiders pay no attention to the "Please Do Not Disturb" sign and invade the writer's privacy?

The author's original title was in the contemporary fashion, especially for films. But EQMM's marquee (the Table of Contents page) has limitations of space, forcing us to abandon, with regret, Mr. Crispin's title—"We Know You're Busy Writing, But We Thought You Wouldn't Mind If We Just Dropped In for a Minute"...

"After all, it's only us," they said.

I must introduce myself.

None of this is going to be read, let alone printed. Ever.

Nevertheless, there is a habit—the habit of putting words together in the most effective order you can think of. There is self-respect, too. That, and habit, make me try to tell this as if it were in fact going to be read.

Which God forbid.

I am 47, unmarried, living alone, a minor crime-fiction writer, earning, on average, a thousand pounds a year.

I live in Devon, in a small cottage which is isolated, in the sense that there is no one nearer than a quarter of a mile.

I am not, however, at a loss for company.

For one thing, I have a telephone.

I am a hypochondriac, well into the coronary belt. Also, I go in fear of accidents, with broken bones. The telephone is thus a necessity. I can afford only one, so its location in the cottage is a matter of great discretion. It is in the hall, just at the foot of the

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steep stairs, on a shelf only two feet from the floor, so that if I have to crawl to it, it will still be within reach.

If I have my coronary *up*stairs, too bad.

The telephone is for me to use in an emergency. Other people, however, regard it differently.

Take, for example, my Bank Manager.

"Torhaven 153," I say to the ring.

"Hello? Bradley, is that Mr. Edward Bradley?"

"Bradley speaking."

"This is Wimpole. Mr. Bradley, I have to talk to you."

"Speaking."

"Now, it's like this, Mr. Bradley. How soon can we expect some further payments in, Mr. Bradley? Payments out, yes, we have plenty of those, but payments in."

"I'm doing everything I can, Mr. Wimpole."

"Everything, yes, everything but payments in. What is going to be coming in during the next month, Mr. Bradley?"

"Quite a lot, I hope."

"Yes, you hope, Mr. Bradley, you hope. But what am I going to say to my Regional Office, Mr. Bradley? How am I going to represent the matter to them? You have this accommodation with us, this matter of five hundred pounds—"

"Had it for years, Mr. Wimpole."

"Yes, Mr. Bradley, and that is exactly the trouble. You must reduce it, Mr. Bradley, reduce it, I say," this lunatic bawls at me.

I can no more reduce my overdraft than I can fly.

I am adequately industrious. I aim to write 2000 words a day, which would support me in the event that I were ever able to complete them. But if you live alone you are not, contrary to popular supposition, in a state of unbroken placidity.

Quite the contrary.

I have tried night work, a consuming yawn to every tap on the typewriter. I have tried early morning work.

And here H. L. Mencken comes in, suggesting that bad writing is due to bad digestion.

My own digestion is bad at any time, particularly bad during milkmen's hours, and I have never found that I could do much in the dawn. This is a weakness, and I admit it. But apparently it has to be. Work, for me, is thus office hours, nine till five.

I have told everyone about this, begging them, if it isn't a matter of emergency, to get in touch with me in the *evenings*. Office

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hours, I tell them, same as everyone else. You wouldn't telephone a solicitor about nothing in particular during his office hours, would you? Well, so why ring me?

I am typing a sentence which starts: *His crushed hand, paining him less now, nevertheless gave him a sense of*

I know what's going to happen after "of": The appalling frailty of the human body.

Or rather, I did know, and it wasn't that. It might have been that (feeble though it is) but for the fact that then the doorbell rang.

It was a Mrs. Prance morning, but she hadn't yet arrived, so I answered the door myself, clattering down from the upstairs room where I work. It was the meter reader. The meter being outside the door, I was at a loss to know why I had to sanction its being scrutinized.

"A sense of the dreadful agonies," I said to the meter reader, "of which the human body is capable."

"Wonderful weather."

"I'll leave you, if you don't mind. I'm a bit busy."

"Suit yourself," he said, offended.

Then Mrs. Prance came.

Mrs. Prance comes three mornings a week. She is slow and deaf, but she is all I can hope to get, short of winning the Football Pools.

She answers the door, but is afraid of the telephone, and consequently never answers that, though I've done my utmost to train her to it.

She is very anxious that I should know precisely what she is doing in my tatty little cottage, and approve of it.

"Mr. Bradley?"

"Yes, Mrs. Prance?"

"It's the Hi-glow."

"What about it, Mrs. Prance?"

"Pardon?"

"I said, what about it?"

"We did ought to change."

"Yes, well, let's change, by all means."

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Yes'."

"Doesn't bring the wood up, not the way it ought to."

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"You're the best judge."

"Pardon?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Prance, but I'm working now. We'll talk about it some other time."

"Toffee-nosed," says Mrs. Prance.

Gave him a sense of—a sense of—a sense of burr-burr, burr-burr

Mrs. Prance shouts that it's the telephone.

I stumble downstairs and pick the thing up.

"Darling."

"Oh, hello, Chris."

"How are you, darling?"

"A sense of the gross cruelty which filled all history."

"What, darling? What was that you said?"

"Sorry. I was just trying to keep a glass of water balanced on my head."

A tinkle of laughter.

"You're a poppet. Listen, I've had a wonderful idea. It's a party. Here in my flat. Today week. You will come, Edward, won't you?"

"Yes, of course I will, Chris, but may I remind you about something?"

"What's that, darling?"

"You said you wouldn't ring me up during working hours."

A short silence, then: "Oh, but *just this once*. It's going to be such a lovely party, darling. You don't mind *just this once*."

"Chris, are you having a coffee break?"

"Yes, darling, and oh, God, don't I need it!"

"Well, I'm *not* having a coffee break."

A rather longer silence, then: "You don't love me any more."

"It's just that I'm trying to get a story written. There's a deadline for it."

"If you don't want to come to the party, all you've got to do is say so."

"I do want to come to the party, but I also want to get on with earning my living. Seriously, Chris, as it's a week ahead, couldn't you have waited till this evening to ring me?"

A sob. "I think you're beastly. I think you're utterly, utterly *horrible*."

"Chris."

"And I never want to *see* you again."

A sense of treachery, I typed sedulously. *The agony still flamed up his arm, but it was*

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The doorbell rang.

it was now less than—more than—

"It's the laundry, Mr. Bradley," Mrs. Prance shouted up the stairs at me.

"Coming, Mrs. Prance."

I went out onto the small landing. Mrs. Prance's great moon face peered up at me from below.

"Coming Thursday next week," she shouted at me, "because of Good Friday."

"Yes, Mrs. Prance, but what has that got to do with *me?* I mean, you'll be here on Wednesday as usual, won't you, to change the sheets?"

"Pardon?"

"Thank you for telling me, Mrs. Prance."

One way and another it was a remarkable Tuesday morning: seven telephone calls, none of them in the least important, eleven people at the door, and Mrs. Prance anxious that no scintilla of her efforts should lack my personal verbal approval. I sat down in front of my typewriter at 9:30. By noon I achieved the following:

His crushed hand, paining him less now, nevertheless gave him a sense of treachery, the appalling frailty of the human body, but it was now less than it had been, more than indifferent to him since, after, because though the pain could be shrugged off the betrayal was a

I make no pretense to be a quick writer, but that really was a very bad morning indeed.

Afternoon started better. With some garlic sausage and bread inside me I ran to another seven paragraphs, unimpeded.

As he clawed his way out, hatred seized him, I tapped out, enthusiastically embarking on the eighth paragraph. *No such emotion had ever before*

The doorbell rang.

had ever before disturbed his quiet existence. It was as if

The doorbell rang again, lengthily, someone leaning on it.

as if a beast had taken charge, a beast inordinate, insatiable

The doorbell was now ringing for many seconds at a time, uninterruptedly.

Was this a survival factor, or would it blur his mind? He scarcely knew. One thing was abundantly clear, namely that he was going to have to answer the bloody doorbell.

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He did so.

On the doorstep, their car standing in the lane beyond, were a couple in early middle age, who could be seen at a glance to be fresh out from The Duke.

The Duke of Devonshire is my local. When I first moved to this quiet part of Devon I had nothing against The Duke: it was a small village pub serving small village drinks, with an occasional commercialized pork pie or sausage roll.

But then it changed hands. A Postgate admirer took over. Hams, game patties, quail eggs, and other such fanciful foods were introduced to a noise of trumpets; esurient lunatics began rolling up in every sort of car, gobble-made for exotic Ploughman's Lunches and suavely served lobster creams, their throats parched for the vinegar of 1964 clarets or the ullage of the abominable home-brewed beer; and there was no longer any peace for anyone.

In particular, there was no longer any peace for me. "Let's go and see old Ted," people said to one another as they were shooed out of the bar at closing time. "He lives near here."

"Charles," said this man on the doorstep, extending his hand.

The woman with him tittered. She had fluffy hair, and lips so pale that they stood out disconcertingly, like scars, against her blotched complexion. "It's Ted, lovey," she said.

"Ted, of course it's Ted. Known him for years. How are you, Charley boy?"

"*Ted,* angel."

I recognized them both, slightly, from one or two parties. They were presumably a married couple, but not married for long, if offensive nonsenses like "Angel" were to be believed.

"We're not interrupting anything," she said.

Interested by this statement of fact, I found spouting up in my pharynx the reply, "Yes, you sodding well are." But this had to be choked back; bourgeois education forbids such replies, other than euphemistically.

"Come on in," I said.

They came on in.

I took them into the downstairs living room, which lack of money has left a ghost of its original intention. There are two armchairs, a chesterfield, a coffee table, a corner cupboard for drinks; but all, despite Hi-glow, dull and tattered on the plain carpet.

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I got them settled on the chesterfield.

"Coffee?" I suggested.

But this seemed not to be what was wanted.

"You haven't got a drink, old boy?" the man said.

"*Stanislas,*" the girl said.

"Yes, of course. Whiskey? Gin? Sherry?"

"Oh, Stanislas darling, you are *awful,*" said this female. "Fancy *asking.*"

I had no recollection of the name of either of them, but surely Stanislas couldn't be right. "Stanislas?" I asked.

"It's private," she said, taking one of his hands in one of hers, and wringing it. "You don't mind? It's sort of a joke. It's private between us."

"I see. Well, what would you like to drink?"

He chose whiskey, she gin and Italian.

"If you'll excuse me I'll have to go upstairs for a minute," I said, after serving them.

One thing was abundantly clear: Giorgio's map had been wrong, and as a consequence

"Ooh-hooh!"

I went out onto the landing.

"Yes?"

"We're lonely."

"Down in just a minute."

"You're doing that nasty writing."

"No, just checking something."

"We heard the typewriter. Do come down, Charles, Edward I mean, we've got something terribly, terribly important to tell you."

"Coming straight away," I said, my mind full of Giorgio's map.

I refilled their glasses.

"You're Diana," I said to her.

"Daphne," she squeaked.

"Yes, of course, Daphne. Drink all right?"

She took a great swallow of it, and so was unable to speak. Stanislas roused himself to fill the conversation gap.

"How's the old writing, then?"

"Going along well."

"Mad Martians, eh? Don't read that sort of thing myself, I'm afraid, too busy with biography and history. Has Daphne told you?"

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"No. Told me what?"

"About Us, old boy, about Us."

This was the first indication I'd had that they *weren't* a married couple. Fond locutions survive courtship by God knows how many years, fossilizing to automatic gabble, and so are no guide to actual relationships. But in "Us," the capital letter, perfectly obvious, flag-wags something new.

"Ah, ha!" I said.

With an effort Stanislas leaned forward. "Daphne's husband is a beast," he said, enunciating distinctly.

"Giorgio's map," I said. "Defective."

"A mere brute. So she's going to throw in her lot with me."

Satisfied, he fell back onto the cushions. "Darling," he said.

As a consequence we were two miles southwest of our expected position. "So what is the expected position?" I asked.

"We're eloping," Daphne said.

"This very day. Darling."

"Angel."

"Yes, this very day," said Stanislas, ostentatiously sucking up the last drops from the bottom of his glass. "This very day as ever is. We've planned it," he confided.

The plan had gone wrong, had gone rotten. Giorgio had failed.

"Had gone rotten," I said, hoping I might just possibly remember the phrase when this pair of lunatics had taken themselves off.

"Rotten is the word for that creep," said Stanislas. Suddenly his eyes filled with alcoholic tears. "What Daphne has suffered, no one will ever know," he gulped. "There's even been . . . beating." Daphne lowered her lids demurely, in tacit confirmation. "So we're off and away together," said Stanislas, recovering slightly. "A new life. Abroad. A new humane relationship."

But was his failure final? Wasn't there still a chance?

"If you'll excuse me," I said, "I shall have to go upstairs again."

But this attempt aborted. Daphne seized me so violently by the wrist as I was on the move, that I had difficulty in not falling over sideways.

"You're with us, aren't you?" she breathed.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"My husband would come after us, if he knew."

"A good thing he doesn't know, then."

"But he'll guess. He'll guess it's Stanislas."

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"I suppose so."

"You don't mind us being here, Charles, do you? We have to wait till dark."

"Well, actually, there is a bit of work I ought to be getting on with."

"I'm sorry, Ted," she said, smoothing her skirt. "We've been inconsiderate. We must go." She went on picking at her hemline, but there was no tensing of the leg muscles, preliminary to rising, so I refilled her glass.

"No, don't go," I said, the British middle class confronting its finest hour. "Tell me more about it."

"Stanislas."

"H'm, h'm."

"Wake *up*, sweetiepie. Tell Charles all about it."

Stanislas got himself approximately upright. "All about what?"

"About Us, angel."

But the devil of it was, if Giorgio's map was wrong, our chances had receded to nil.

"To nil," I said. "Nil."

"Not nil at all, old boy," Stanislas said. "And as a matter of fact, if you don't mind my saying so, I rather resent that 'nil.' We may not be special, like writer blokes like you, but we aren't 'nil,' Daphne and me. We're human, and so forth. Cut us and we bleed, and that. I'm no great cop, I'll grant you that, but Daphne—Daphne—"

"A splendid girl," I said.

"Yes, you say that now, but what would you have said five minutes ago? Eh? Eh?"

"The same thing, of course."

"You think you're rather marvelous, don't you? You think you've . . . got it made. Well, let me tell you one thing, Mr. so-called Bradley: you may think you're very clever, with all this writing of Westerns and so on, but I can tell you, there are more important things in life than Westerns. I don't suppose you'll understand about it, but there's Love.

"Daphne and I, we love one another. You can jeer, and you do jeer. All I can tell you is you're wrong as can be. Daphne and I, we're going off together and to hell with people who jeer."

"Have another drink."

"Well, thanks, I don't mind if I do."

They stayed for four whole hours.

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Somewhere in the middle they made a pretense of drinking tea. Some time after that they expressed concern at the length of time they had stayed—without, however, giving any sign of leaving. I gathered, as Giorgio and his map faded inexorably from my mind, that their elopement plans were dependent on darkness: this, rather than the charm of my company, was what they were waiting for.

Meanwhile, with my deadline irrevocably lost, I listened to their soul searching—he unjustifiably divorced, she tied to a brutish lout who unfortunately wielded influence over a large range of local and national affairs, and would pursue her to the ends of the earth unless precautions were taken to foil him.

I heard a good deal about these precautions, registering them without, at the time, realizing how useful they were going to be.

"Charles, Edward."

"Yes?"

"We've been inconsiderate."

"Of course not."

"We haven't been letting you get on with your work."

"Too late now."

"Not really too late," lachrymosely. "You go and write, and we'll just sit here, and do no harm to a soul."

"I've rather forgotten what I was saying, and in any case I've missed the last post."

"Oh, Charles, Charles, you shame us. We abase ourselves."

"No need for that."

"*Naturally* we abase ourselves. We've drunk your liquor, we've sat on your . . . your sofa, we've stopped your working. Sweetie-pie, isn't that true? Haven't we stopped him working?"

"If you say so, sweetie-pie."

"I most certainly do say so. And it's a disgrace."

"So we're disgraced, Poppet. Bad," she said histrionically. "But are we so bad? I mean, he's self-employed, he's got all the time in the world, he can work whenever he likes. Not like you and me. He's got it *made*."

"Oh, God," I mumbled.

"Well, that's true," Stanislas said, with difficulty. "And it's a nice quiet life."

"Quiet, that's it."

"Don't have to do anything if you don't want to. Ah, come the day."

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"He's looking cross."

"What's that? Old Charles looking cross? Angel, you're mistaken. Don't you believe it. Not cross, Charles, are you?"

"We *have* stayed rather long, darling. Darling, are you awake? I say, we *have* stayed rather long."

"H'm."

"But it's special. Edward, it's special. You do see that, don't you? Special. Because of Stanislas and me."

I said, "All I know is that I—"

"Just this once," she said. "You'll forgive us just this once? After all, you *are* a free agent. After all, it's only us."

I stared at them.

I looked at him, nine-tenths asleep. I looked at her, half asleep. I thought what a life they were going to have if they eloped.

But "It's only us" had triggered something.

I remember that on just that one day, there had been Mrs. Prance, the meter reader, Chris (twice: she had telephoned a second time during working hours to apologize for telephoning for the first time during working hours), the laundryman, the grocer (no Chivers peas this week), my tax accountant, a woman collecting for the Church, a Frenchman wanting to know if he was on the right road to The Duke.

I remembered that a frippet had come from the National Insurance, or whatever it's called now, to ask what I was doing about Mrs. Prance, and if not, why not. I remembered a long inconclusive telephone call from someone's secretary at the B.B.C.—the someone, despite his anxiety to be in touch with me, having vanished without notice into the B.B.C. Club. I remembered that undergratuates at the University of Essex were wanting me to give them a talk, and were going to be so good as to pay second-class rail fare, though no fee.

I remembered that my whole morning's work had been a single botched paragraph, and that my afternoon's work, before this further interruption, had been little more than two hundred words.

I remembered that I had missed the post.

I remembered that I had missed the post before, for much the same reasons, and that publishers are unenthusiastic about writers who keep failing to meet deadlines.

I remembered that I was very short of money, and that giving drinks to almost total strangers for four hours on end wasn't the best way of improving the situation.

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I remembered.

I saw red.

A red mist swam before his eyes, doing the butterfly stroke.

I picked up the poker from the fireplace.

Did they—I sometimes ask myself—wonder what I could possibly be doing, edging round the back of the chesterfield with a great lump of iron in my hand?

They were probably too far gone to wonder.

In any case they weren't left wondering for long.

Eighteen months have passed.

At the end of the first week a Detective Constable came to see me. His name was Ellis. He was thin to the point of emaciation, and seemed, despite his youth, permanently depressed. He was in plain clothes.

He told me that their names were Daphne Fiddler and Clarence Oates.

"Now, sir, we've looked into this matter, and we understand that you didn't know this lady and gentleman at all well."

"I'd just met them once or twice."

"They came here, though, that Tuesday afternoon."

"Yes, but they'd been booted out of the pub. People often come here because they've been booted out of the pub."

Lounging on the chesterfield, ignoring its blotches, Ellis said, "They were looking for a drink, eh?"

"Yes, they did seem to be doing that."

"I'm not disturbing your work, sir, I hope."

"Yes, you are, Officer, as a matter of fact. So did they."

"If you wouldn't mind, sir, don't call me 'Officer.' I am one, technically. But as a mode of address it's pointless."

"Sorry."

"I'll have to disturb your work a little bit more still, sir, I'm afraid. Now, if I may ask, did this—this *pair*—say anything to you about their plans?"

"Did they say anything to anyone else?"

"Yes, Mr. Bradley, to half the population of South Devon."

"Well, I can tell you what they said to me. They said they were going to get a boat from Torquay to Jersey, and then a plane from Jersey to Guernsey, and then a Hovercraft from Guernsey to France. They were going to carry their passports with them, and

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cash sewn into the linings of their clothes. Then they were going on from France to some other country, where they could get jobs without a *permis de sejour*."

"Some countries, there's loopholes big as a camel's gates," said Ellis biblically.

I said, "They'll make a mess of it, you know."

"Hash slinging for her," said Ellis despondently, "and driving a taxi for him. What was the last you saw of them?"

"They drove off."

"Yes, but when?"

"Oh, after dark. Perhaps seven. What happened after that?"

"The Falls."

"Sorry?"

"The *Falls*. Their car was found abandoned there."

"Oh."

"No luggage in it."

"Oh."

"So presumably they got on the Torquay bus."

"You can't find out?"

Ellis wriggled on the cushions. "Driver's an idiot. Doesn't see or hear *anything*."

"I was out at the Falls myself."

"Pardon?"

"I say, I was out at the Falls myself. I followed them on foot—though of course I didn't *know* I was doing that."

"Did you see their car there?" Ellis asked.

"I saw several cars, but they all look alike nowadays. And they all had their lights off. You don't go around peering into cars at the Falls that have their lights off."

"And then, sir?"

"I just walked back. It's a fairly normal walk for me in the evenings, after I've eaten. I mean, it's a walk I often take."

(And I had, in fact, walked back by the lanes as usual, resisting the temptation to skulk across the fields. Good for me to have dumped the car unnoticed near the bus stop, and good for me to have remembered about the luggage before I set out.)

"Good for me." I said.

"Pardon?"

"Good for me to be able to do that walk, still."

Ellis unfolded himself, getting up from the chesterfield. Good for me that he hadn't got a kit with him to test the blotches.

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"It's just a routine inquiry, Mr. Bradley," he said faintly, his vitality seemingly at a low ebb. "Mrs. Fiddler's husband, Mr. Oates's wife, they felt they should inquire. Missing Persons, you see. But just between ourselves," he added, his voice livening momentarily, "they neither of 'em care a button. It's obvious what's happened, and they neither of 'em care a button. Least said, Mr. Bradley, soonest mended."

He went.

I should have felt guilty; but in fact I felt purged.

Catharsis.

Am I purged of pity? I hope not. I feel pity for Daphne and Stanislas, at the same time as irritation at their unconscionable folly.

Purged of fear?

Well, in an odd sort of way, yes.

Things have gotten worse for me. The strain of reducing my overdraft by £250 has left me with Mrs. Prance only two days a week, and rather more importantly, I now have to count the tins of baked beans and the loaves I shall use for toasting.

But I feel better.

The interruptions are no less than before. Wimpole, Chris, my tax accountant all help to fill my working hours in the same old way.

But now I feel almost indulgent toward them. Toward everyone, even Mrs. Prance.

For one thing, I garden a lot.

I get a fair number of flowers, but this is more luck than judgment. Vegetables are my chief thing.

And this autumn the cabbages have done particularly well. Harvest cabbages, they stand up straight and conical, their dark green outer leaves folded close, moisture-globed, protecting firm crisp hearts.

For harvest cabbages you can't beat nicely rotted organic fertilizer.

Can I ever bring myself to cut my harvest cabbages and eat them?

At the *moment* I don't want to eat my harvest cabbages. But I daresay in the end I shall.

After all, it's only them.

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Isaac Asimov

The Obvious Factor

One of the best of the Black Widower sessions . . . Are you interested in the parapsychological? Telepathy? Precognition? Ghosts and spiritual phenomena? Things that can't be explained by the accepted laws of science? You say you're not interested? Try it; you'll like it. You say you are interested? Fine! Then tackle an incident "for which no conceivable run-of-the-mill explanation seems possible; where the evidence for something quite apart from the known rules by which the Universe seems to run appears irrefutable."

We'll give you one clue: keep in mind Sherlock Holmes's "great precept" . . .

Detectives: THE BLACK WIDOWERS and HENRY

Thomas Trumbull, the code expert, looked around the table and said, with some satisfaction, "Well, at least you won't get yourself pen-and-inked into oblivion, Voss. Our resident artist isn't here.–*Henry!*"

Henry was at Trumbull's elbow before the echo of the bellow had died, with no sign of perturbation on his bright-eyed and unlined face. Trumbull took the Scotch and soda the waiter had on his tray and said, "Has Mario called, Henry?"

"No, sir," said Henry calmly.

Geoffrey Avalon, the patent attorney, had reduced his second drink to the halfway point and was swirling it absently. "After last month's tale about his murdered sister, it could be that he didn't want to—"

He did not complete the sentence, but put down his glass carefully in front of the seat he intended to take. The monthly banquet of the Black Widowers was about to begin.

Trumbull, who was host, took the armchair at the head of the table and said, "Have you got them all straight, Voss? At my left

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is James Drake. He's a chemist, but he knows much more about pulp fiction than about chemistry. Then Geoffrey Avalon, a lawyer who never sees the inside of a courtroom; Emmanuel Rubin, who writes fiction in between talking, which is practically never; and Roger Halsted—Roger, you're not inflicting another limerick on us this session, are you?"

"A limerick?" said Trumbull's guest, speaking for the first time. His voice was pleasant, light and yet rich, with all consonants carefully pronounced. He had a white beard, evenly cut from temple to temple, and white hair. His youthful face shone pinkly within its white fence. "A poet, too?"

"Poet?" snorted Trumbull. "Not even a mathematician, which is what he claims to be. He insists on writing a limerick for every book of the *Iliad*."

"And the *Odyssey*," said Halsted, in his soft, unhurried voice. "But, yes, I have my limerick."

"Good! It's out of order," said Trumbull, "You are not to read it. I claim host's privilege."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Avalon, the flat lines of his well-preserved face set in disappointment. "Let him recite the poor thing. It takes thirty seconds and I find it fun."

Trumbull pretended not to hear. "You've all got it straight about my guest now. He's Dr. Voss Eldridge. He's a Ph.D. So is Drake, Voss. We're all doctors, though, by virtue of membership in the Black Widowers." He then raised his glass, gave the monthly invocation to Old King Cole, and the meal was officially begun.

Halsted, who had been whispering to Drake, passed a paper to him. Drake rose and declaimed:

"Next a Lycian attempted a ruse
"With an arrow—permitted by Zeus.
"Who will trust Trojan candor, as
"This sly deed of Pandarus
"Puts an end to the scarce-proclaimed truce."

"Damn it," said Trumbull. "I ruled against reading it!"

"Against *my* reading it," said Halsted. "Drake read it."

"It's disappointing not to have Mario here," said Avalon. "He would ask what it means."

"Go ahead, Jeff," said Rubin. "I'll pretend I don't understand it and you explain it to us."

But Avalon maintained a dignified silence while Henry served

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the appetizer and Rubin fixed it with his usual suspicious stare.

"I hate stuff," he said, "that's so chopped up and drowned in goop that you can't see what the ingredients are."

Henry said, "I think you'll find it quite wholesome."

"And you know Henry's honesty," said Drake. "It wouldn't hurt a fly if he says it's wholesome."

"Try it; you'll like it," said Avalon.

Rubin tried it but his face showed no signs of liking it. It was noted later, however, that he had finished it.

Dr. Eldridge said, "Is there a necessity of explaining these limericks, Dr. Avalon? Are there tricks to them?"

"No, not at all, and don't bother with the doctorate. That's only for formal occasions, though it's good of you to humor one of the club's idiosyncracies. It's just that Mario has never read the *Iliad;* few have, these days."

"Pandarus, as I recall, was a go-between and gives us the word 'pander.' That, I take it, was the sly deed referred to in the limerick."

"Oh, no, no," said Avalon, unsuccessfully hiding his delight. "You're thinking now of the medieval Troilus-tale, which Shakespeare drew on for his *Troilus and Cressida.* Pandarus was the go-between in that. In the *Iliad* he was merely a Lycian archer who shot at Menelaus during a truce. That was the sly deed. —He is killed in the next book by the Greek warrior, Diomedes."

"Ah," said Eldridge, smiling faintly, "it's easy to be fooled, isn't it?"

"If you want to be," said Rubin, smiling as the London broil arrived. There was no mistaking the nature of its components. He buttered a roll and ate it as though to give himself time to contemplate the beauty of the meat.

"As a matter of fact," said Halsted, "we've solved quite a few puzzles in recent meetings. We did rather well."

"We did poorly," said Trumbull. "Henry is the one who did well."

"I *include* Henry when I say 'we'," said Halsted, his fair face flushing.

"Henry?" asked Eldridge.

"Our esteemed waiter," said Trumbull, "and honorary member of the Black Widowers."

Henry, who was filling the water glasses, said, "You honor me, sir."

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"Honor, hell. I wouldn't come to any meeting if you weren't taking care of the table, Henry."

"It's good of you to say so, sir."

Eldridge remained thoughtfully quiet thereafter, as he followed the tide of conversation that, as was usual, grew steadily in intensity. Drake was making some obscure distinction between Secret Agent X and Operator 5, and Rubin, for some reason known only to himself, was disputing the point.

Drake, whose slightly hoarse voice never rose, said, "Operator 5 may have used disguises. I won't deny that. It was Secret Agent X, however, who was 'the man of a thousand faces.' I can send you a Xerox of the contents page of a magazine from my library to prove it." He made a note to himself in his memo book.

Rubin, scenting defeat, shifted ground. "There's no such thing as a disguise, anyway. There are a thousand things no one can disguise—idiosyncracies of stance, walk, voice; a thousand habits you can't change because you don't even know you have them. A disguise works only because no one *looks*."

"People fool themselves, in other words," said Eldridge.

"Absolutely," said Rubin. "People *want* to be fooled."

The ice-cream parfait was brought in, and not long after that Trumbull struck his water glass with his spoon.

"Inquisition time," he said. "As Grand Inquisitor I pass, since I'm the host. Manny, will you do the honors?"

Rubin said at once, "Dr. Eldridge, how do you justify the fact of your existence?"

"By the fact that I labor to distinguish truth from folly."

"Do you consider that you succeed in doing so?"

"Not as often as I wish; perhaps. And yet as often as most. To distinguish truth from folly is a common desire; we all try our hands at it. My interpretation of Pandarus' deed in Halsted's limerick was folly and Avalon corrected me. The common notion of disguise—you claimed that to be folly and you corrected it. When I find folly, I try to correct it, if I can."

"What is your form of folly correction, Eldridge? How would you describe your profession?"

"I am," said Eldridge, "Associate Professor of Abnormal Psychology."

"Where do you—" began Rubin.

Avalon interrupted, his deep voice dominating, "Sorry, Manny, but I smell an evasion. You asked Dr. Eldridge's profession and

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he gave you a title. —What do you do, Dr. Eldridge, to occupy your time most significantly?"

"I investigate parapsychological phenomena," said Eldridge.

"Oh, God," muttered Drake, and stubbed out his cigarette.

Eldridge said, "You disapprove of that, sir?" There was no sign of annoyance on his face. He turned to Henry and said, "No, thank you, Henry, I've had enough coffee."

Henry passed on to Rubin, who was holding his cup in the air as a signal of its emptiness.

"It's not a question of approval or disapproval," said Drake. "I simply think you're wasting your time."

"In what way?"

"You investigate telepathy, precognition, things like that?"

"Yes. And ghosts and spiritual phenomena, too."

"All right. Have you ever come across something you could *not* explain?"

"Explain in what way? I could explain a ghost by simply saying, 'Yes, that's a ghost.' I take it that's not what you mean."

Rubin broke in. "I hate to be on Drake's side right now, but he means to ask whether or not you have ever come across a phenomenon you could not explain by the accepted and prosaic laws of science."

"I have come across many such phenomena."

"That you could not explain?" asked Halsted.

"That I could not explain. Not a month passes that something doesn't cross my desk which I cannot explain," said Eldridge, nodding his head gently.

There was a short silence of palpable disagreement and then Avalon said, "Does that mean you believe in these psychic phenomena?"

"If you mean, do I think events take place that violate the laws of physics, no. Do I think, however, that I know all there is to know about the laws of physics? Also, no. Do I think *anyone* knows all there is to know about the laws of physics? No, a third time."

"That's evasion," said Drake. "Do you have any evidence, for example, that telepathy exists, and that the laws of physics, as presently accepted, will have to be modified accordingly?"

"I am not ready to commit myself that far. I well know that in even the most circumstantial stories there are honest mistakes, exaggerations, misinterpretations, outright hoaxes. And yet, even

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allowing for all that, I have come across incidents I cannot bring myself to dismiss."

Eldridge shook his head and continued, "It's not easy, this job of mine. There are some incidents for which no conceivable run-of-the-mill explanation seems possible; where the evidence for something quite apart from the known rules by which the Universe seems to run appears irrefutable. It would seem I *must* accept—and yet I hesitate. Can I labor under a hoax so cleverly manipulated, or an error so cleverly hidden, that I take for the gold of fact what is only the brass of nonsense? I can be fooled, as Rubin would point out."

Trumbull said, "Manny would say that you *want* to be fooled."

"Maybe I do. We all want dramatic things to be true. We want to be able to wish on a star, to have strange powers, to be irresistible to women—and would inwardly conspire to believe such things no matter how much we might lay claim to complete rationality."

"Not me," said Rubin flatly. "I've never kidded myself in my life."

"No?" Eldridge looked at him thoughtfully. "I take it then that you refuse to believe in the actual existence of parapsychological phenomena under all circumstances?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Rubin, "but I'd need damned good evidence—better evidence than I've ever seen advanced."

"And how about the rest of you gentlemen?"

Drake said, "We're all rationalists."

"You, too, Tom?"

Trumbull's lined face broke into a grim smile. "You've never convinced me with any of your tales before this, Voss. I don't think you can convince me now."

"I never told you tales that convinced *me*, Tom. —But I have one now, something I've never told you and that no one really knows about outside my department. I can tell it to you all and if you can come up with an explanation that would require no change in the fundamental scientific view of the Universe, I would be greatly relieved."

"A ghost story?" said Halsted.

"No, not a ghost story," said Eldridge. "It is merely a story that defies the principle of cause and effect, the very foundation stone on which all science is built. To put it another way, it defies the concept of the irreversible forward flow of time."

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"Actually," said Rubin, "it's quite possible, on the subatomic level, to consider time as flowing either—"

"Please, Manny," said Trumbull, "let Voss talk."

Henry had quietly placed the brandy before each of the diners. Eldrige lifted his small glass absently and sniffed at it, then nodded to Henry, who returned a small urbane smile.

"It's an odd thing," said Eldridge, "but so many of those who claim to have strange powers, or have it claimed for them, are young women of no particular education, no particular presence, no particular intelligence. It is as though the existence of a special talent has consumed all the more usual facets of personality. Maybe it's just more noticeable in women.

"At any rate, I am speaking of someone I'll just call Miriam for now. You understand I'm not using her real name. The woman is still under investigation and it would be disastrous, from my point of view, to get any kind of publicity hounds on her track. You understand?"

Trumbull frowned severely. "Come on, Voss, you know I assured you that nothing said here is ever repeated outside the confines of these walls. You needn't feel constrained."

"Accidents do happen," said Eldridge equably. "At any rate, Miriam never completed grade school and earns her living as a salesgirl at a five-and-ten. She is not attractive and no one will sweep her away from the counter, which may be a good thing—she is useful there and serves the customers well. You might not think so, since she cannot add correctly and is subject to incapacitating headaches during which she will sit in a back room and upset the other employees by muttering gibberish to herself. Nevertheless, the store wouldn't dream of letting her go."

"Why not?" asked Rubin, clearly steeling himself to skepticism at every point.

"Because she spots shoplifters who, as you know, can bleed a store to death these days through a thousand small cuts. It isn't that Miriam is in any way shrewd or keen-eyed or unrelenting in pursuit. She just knows a shoplifter when he or she enters the store, even if Miriam has never seen the person before, and even if she doesn't actually see the person come in.

"At first she followed them herself for brief intervals, then grew hysterical and began her muttering. The manager eventually tied the two things together—Miriam's characteristic behavior and the shoplifting. He started to watch for one, then the other, and it did-

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n't take long for him to find out that she never missed.

"Losses quickly dropped to virtually nothing in that particular five-and-ten despite the fact that the store is in a bad neighborhood. The manager, of course, received all the credit. He probably deliberately kept the truth from becoming known to prevent anyone trying to steal Miriam away.

"But then I think he began to grow afraid of it. Miriam fingered a shoplifter who later was mixed up in a shooting incident. He had read about some of the work my department does, so he came to us. Eventually he brought Miriam to us.

"We got her to come to the college regularly. We paid her, of course. Not much, but then she didn't ask for much. She was an unpleasant, not-bright girl of about twenty, who was reluctant to talk and describe what went on in her mind. I suppose she had spent a childhood having her queer notions beaten out of her and had learned to be cautious."

Drake said, "You're telling us she had a gift for precognition?"

Eldridge said, "Since precognition is just Latin for seeing-things-before-they-happen, and since she sees things before they happen, how else can I describe it? She sees unpleasant things only, things that upset or frighten her, which, I imagine, makes her life a hell. It is the quality of becoming upset or frightened that breaks down the time barrier."

Halsted said, "Let's set some boundaries. How far ahead in time does she see things? How far away in space?"

"We could never get her to do much for us," said Eldridge. "Her talent wasn't on tap at will and with us she never relaxed. From what the manager told us and from what we could pick up, it seemed she could never detect anything more than a short time ahead—half an hour to an hour at the most."

Rubin snorted.

"A few minutes," said Eldridge mildly, "is as good as a century. The principle stands. Cause-and-effect is violated and the flow of time is reversed.

"But in space there seemed no limits. As she described it, when I could get her to say anything at all, and as I interpreted her rather clumsy and incoherent words, the background of her mind is a constant flickering of frightening shapes. Every once in a while this is lit up, as though by a momentary lightning flash, and she sees, or becomes aware. She sees most clearly what is close by or what she is most concerned about—the shoplifting, for

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instance. Occasionally, though, she sees what must be taking place farther away. The greater the disaster, the farther she can sense things. I suspect she could detect a nuclear bomb getting ready to explode anywhere in the world."

Rubin said, "I imagine she speaks incoherently and you fill in the rest. History is full of ecstatic prophets whose mumbles are interpreted as wisdom."

"I agree," said Eldridge, "and I pay no attention—at least, not much—to anything that isn't clear. I don't even attach importance to her feats with shoplifters. She might be sensitive enough to detect some characteristic way in which shoplifters look and stand, some aura, some smell—the sort of thing you talked about, Rubin, as things no one can disguise. But then—"

"Then?" prompted Halsted.

"Just a minute," said Eldridge. "Henry, could I have a refill in my coffee cup after all?"

"Certainly," said Henry.

Eldridge watched the coffee level rise. "What's *your* attitude on psychic phenomena, Henry?"

Henry said, "I have no general attitude, sir. I accept whatever it seems to me I must accept."

"Good!" said Eldridge. "I'll rely on you and not on these prejudiced and preconcepted rationalists here."

"Go on, then," said Drake. "You paused at the dramatic moment to throw us off."

"No," said Eldridge. "I was saying that I did not take Miriam seriously until one day she suddenly began to squirm and pant and mumble under her breath. She does that now and then, but this time she kept muttering, 'Eldridge, Eldridge,' and the word grew shriller and shriller.

"I assumed she was calling me, but she wasn't. When I responded she ignored me. Over and over again it was 'Eldridge, Eldridge!' Then she began to scream, 'Fire! Oh, Lord! It's burning! Help! Eldridge! Eldridge! Over and over again, with all kinds of variations. She kept it up for half an hour.

"We tried to make some sense out of it. We spoke quietly, of course, because we didn't want to intrude more than we had to, but we kept saying, 'Where? Where?' Incoherently enough, and in scraps, she told us enough to make us guess it was San Francisco which, I need not tell you, is three thousand miles away. There's only one Golden Gate Bridge after all, and in one spasm she

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gasped out, 'Golden Gate,' over and over. Afterward it turned out she had never heard of the Golden Gate Bridge and was quite shaky even as to the location of San Francisco.

"When we put it all together we decided that there was an old apartment house somewhere in San Francisco, possibly within eyeshot of the Bridge, that had gone up in fire. A total of twenty-three people were in it at the time it burst into flames, and of these, five did not escape. The five deaths included that of a child."

Halsted said, "And then you checked and found there *was* a fire in San Francisco and that five people had died, including a child."

"That's exactly right," said Eldridge. "But here's what got me. One of the five deaths was of a woman, Sophronia Latimer. She had got out safely and then discovered that her eight-year-old boy had not escaped. She ran wildly back into the house, screaming for the boy, and never came out again. The boy's name was Eldridge, so you can see what the woman was shouting in the minutes before her death.

"Eldridge is a very uncommon first name, as I need not tell you, and my feeling is that Miriam captured that particular event, even though it was so far away, entirely because she had been sensitized to the name, by way of myself, and because it was surrounded by such agony."

Rubin said, "You want an explanation, is that it?"

"Of course," said Eldridge. "How did this ignorant girl see a fire in full detail before it happened, get all the facts correct—and believe me, we checked them out—and at three thousand miles away?"

Rubin said, "What makes the three-thousand-mile distance so impressive? These days it means nothing; about one-sixtieth of a second at the speed of light. I suggest that she heard the tale of the fire on radio or television, more likely the latter, and passed it on to you. That's why she chose that story—because of the name Eldridge. She figured it would produce the greatest possible effect on you."

"Why?" asked Eldridge. "Why should she perpetrate such a hoax?"

"Why?" Rubin's voice faded out momentarily, as though with astonishment, then came back in a shout. "Good God, you've been working with these people for years and don't realize how much they *want* to hoax you. Don't you suppose there's a feeling of

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power that comes with successfully perpetrating a hoax; and money too, don't forget."

Eldridge thought about it, then shook his head. "She doesn't have the brains to put something like that across. It takes brains to be a faker—a good one, anyway."

Trumbull said, "Well, now, Voss. There's no reason to suppose she's in it on her own. A confederate is possible. She supplies the hysteria, he supplies the brains."

"Who might the confederate be?" asked Eldridge softly.

Trumbull shrugged. "I don't know."

Avalon cleared his throat and said, "I go along with Tom here, and my guess is that the confederate is the manager of the five-and-ten. He noticed her ability to guess at shoplifters, and thought he could exploit it, put it to use in something more splashy. I'll bet that's it. He was the one who heard about the fire on television, caught the name Eldridge, and coached her."

"How long would it take to coach her?" asked Eldridge. "I keep telling you she's not very bright."

"The coaching wouldn't be difficult," said Rubin. "You say she was incoherent. He would just teach her a few key words: Eldridge, fire, Golden Gate, and so on. She then keeps repeating them in random arrangements and you intelligent parapsychologists fill in the rest."

Eldridge nodded, then said, "That's interesting, except that there was no time to coach the girl. That's what precognition is all about. We know exactly what time she had her spell and we know exactly what time the fire broke out in San Francisco. It so happens the fire broke out at just about the minute that Miriam's spell died down. It was as though once the fire was a fact, no longer a matter of precognition, Miriam lost contact. —So you see, there could not have been any coaching. The news didn't hit the network TV news programs till that evening. That's when *we* found out and began our investigation in depth."

"But wait," said Halsted. "What about the time difference? There's a three-hour time difference between New York and San Francisco, and a confederate in San Francisco—"

"A confederate in San Francisco?" said Eldridge, opening his eyes wide, and staring. "Are you imagining a continental conspiracy? Besides, believe me, I know about the time difference. When I say that the fire started just as Miriam finished, I mean allowing for the time difference. Miriam's spell began at just about 1:15

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P.M., Eastern Standard Time, and the fire in San Francisco started at 10:45 A.M., Pacific Standard Time."

Drake said, "I have a suggestion."

"Go on," said Eldridge.

"This is an uneducated and unintelligent girl—you keep saying that over and over—and she's throwing a fit, an epileptic fit for all I know."

"No," said Eldridge firmly.

"All right, a prophetic fit, if you wish. She's muttering and mumbling and screaming and doing everything in the world but speaking clearly and coherently. She makes sounds which *you* interpret, and which you put together. If it had occurred to you to hear her say something like 'atom bomb,' then the word you interpreted as 'Eldridge' would have become 'Oak Ridge,' for instance."

"And Golden Gate?"

"She might have said something like 'couldn't get'."

"Not bad," said Eldridge. "Except that we know it is hard to understand some of these ecstatics and we're bright enough to make use of modern technology. We routinely tape-record our sessions and we tape-recorded this one. We've listened to it over and over and there is no question but that she said 'Eldridge' and not 'Oak Ridge'; and 'Golden Gate' and not 'couldn't get'. We've had different people listen and there is no disagreement on this. Besides, from what we heard, we worked out all the details of the fire *before* we got the facts. And we had to make no modifications afterward. It all agreed exactly."

There was a long silence at the table.

Finally Eldridge said, "Well, there it is. Miriam foresaw the fire three thousand miles away by a full half hour and got all the facts correct."

Drake said uneasily, "Do *you* accept it? Do *you* think it was precognition?"

"I'm trying not to," said Eldridge. "But tell me why I should disbelieve it. I don't want to fool myself into believing it, but what choice do I have? At what point am I fooling myself? If it wasn't precognition, what was it? I had hoped that perhaps one of you gentlemen could tell me."

Again a silence.

Eldridge went on. "I'm left in a position where I must refer to Sherlock Holmes's great precept. 'When you have eliminated the

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impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' In this case, if fakery of any kind is impossible, precognition *must* be the truth. Don't you all agree?"

The silence was longer than before, until Trumbull cried out, "Damn it all, Henry is grinning. No one's asked *him* to explain this.—Well, Henry?"

Henry coughed. "I should not have smiled, gentlemen, but I couldn't help it when Professor Eldridge used that quotation. It seems the final piece of evidence that you gentlemen *want* to believe."

"The hell we do," said Rubin, frowning.

"Surely then a quotation from President Thomas Jefferson would have sprung to mind."

"What quotation?" asked Halsted.

"I imagine Mr. Rubin knows," said Henry.

"I probably do, Henry, but at the moment I can't think of an appropriate one. Is it in the Declaration of Independence?"

"No, sir," began Henry, when Trumbull interrupted and said, "Let's not play Twenty Questions, Manny. Go on, Henry, what are you getting at?"

"Well, sir, to say that when the impossible has been eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth is to make the assumption, usually unjustified, that everything that can be considered has indeed been considered. Let us suppose we have considered ten factors. Nine are clearly impossible. Is the tenth, however improbable, therefore true? What if there were an eleventh factor, a twelfth?"

Avalon said severely, "You mean there's a factor we haven't considered?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Henry, nodding.

Avalon shook his head. "I can't think what it can be."

"And yet it is an obvious factor, sir. In fact, it's the *most* obvious one."

"What is it, then?" demanded Halsted, clearly annoyed. "Get to the point, man!"

"Well," said Henry, "suppose we begin by also considering precognition to be impossible. In that case—"

Rubin got to his feet, his straggly beard bristling, his eyes magnified through thick-lensed glasses. "Of course! The fire was *set*. The woman could have been coached for weeks in advance. The accomplice goes to San Francisco and they synchronize. She

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predicts something she *knows* is going to happen. He causes something he knows *she will predict.*"

Henry said, "Are you suggesting, sir, that a confederate would deliberately plan to kill five victims, including an eight-year-old boy?"

"Don't start trusting in the virtue of mankind, Henry," said Rubin. "You're the one who is sensitive to wrongdoing."

"To minor wrongdoing, sir, the kind most people are willing to overlook. But I find it difficult to believe that anyone, in order to establish a case of precognition, would deliberately arrange a horrible multimurder. Besides, to arrange a fire in which eighteen of twenty-three people escape and five specific people die requires a bit of precognition in itself."

Rubin turned stubborn. "I can see ways in which five people can be trapped. It's like forcing a card in a conjuring trick—"

"Gentlemen!" said Eldridge peremptorily, and all turned to look at him. "I have not told you the cause of the fire."

He went on, after looking around the table to make sure he had their attention, "It was a stroke of lightning. I don't see how a stroke of lightning could be arranged at a specific time." He spread out his hands helplessly. "I tell you, I've been struggling with this for weeks. I don't want to accept precognition, but— I suppose this spoils your theory, Henry?"

"On the contrary, Professor Eldridge, it confirms it and makes it certain. Ever since you began to tell us this tale of Miriam and the fire, every word you've said has made it more and more certain that fakery is impossible and that precognition has taken place. If, however, precognition is also considered impossible, then it follows, of necessity, Professor, that you have been lying."

Every Black Widower exclaimed at that, with Avalon's shocked "Henry!" loudest of all.

But Eldridge was leaning back in his chair, chuckling. "Of course I was lying. From beginning to end. I wanted to see if all you so-called rationalists would be so eager to accept parapsychological phenomena that you would overlook the obvious rather than spoil your own thrill. —When did you catch on, Henry?"

"It was a possibility from the start, sir, which grew stronger each time you eliminated a solution by inventing more information. I was positive when you mentioned the lightning. That was so dramatic that surely you would have brought it in at the very

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beginning. To be mentioned only at the very end made it clear that you created it, improvised it, on the spot to block a final nope."

"But why was lying a possibility from the start, Henry?" demanded Eldridge. "Do I *look* like a liar? Can you detect liars the way I had Miriam detect shoplifters?"

"Because it is *always* a possibility, always something to be kept in mind and watched for. That is where the remark by President Jefferson comes in."

"What was that?"

"In 1807 Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale reported seeing the fall of a meteorite at a time when the existence of meteorites was not accepted by scientists. Thomas Jefferson, a rationalist of enormous talent and intelligence, on hearing the report, said, 'I would sooner believe that a Yankee professor would lie than that a stone would fall from heaven.' "

"Yes," said Avalon at once, "but Jefferson was wrong. Silliman did *not* lie and a stone *did* fall from heaven."

"Quite so, Mr. Avalon," said Henry, unruffled. "That is why the quotation is remembered. But considering the great number of times that impossibilities have been reported, and the small number of times they have been proved possible, I felt the odds were with me."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I hope that no reader thinks the solution is unfair. In real life a great many reports of unconventional phenomena are the results of deviations from the truth, either deliberate or unconscious. In fiction, however, when the apparently irrational is rationalized, complicated hoaxes involving all kinds of unlikely devices are presented, and never once, to my knowledge, has something been cleared up by considering the possibility that it was all a lie. Well, let me be the first.—I.A.

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Patricia McGerr

A Choice of Murders

Paul and Joe Garrison were brothers, and their faces bore a strong family resemblance—especially the "Garrison nose." Joe was an ex-con, a criminal with a record. Paul was trying hard to be an honest man, but he was desperately in need of money.

Patricia McGerr puts it all together, and then brings Lieutenant Thurmond of Homicide on the scene . . .

My brother Joe never was any good. When we were boys—though I was two years older—he was the ringleader in all our scrapes. We started by stealing candy and cigarettes from the corner store and progressed to socks, ties, and cuff links. When I was 18 we were caught joyriding in a stranger's car and drew a six-month suspended sentence. That scared me out of any criminal leanings, but not Joe.

His next arrest was for carting a typewriter and adding machine from the school office. That put him in the reformatory for a year. When he came out he was ready for the big time. I tried to steer clear of him, but every couple of weeks he'd drop by the restaurant where I was night manager to flash a roll of bills.

"You want to be poor all your life?" he taunted. "You like ringing up nickels and dimes for somebody else?"

"I want to stay out of jail," I answered. "You like being locked up?"

"I was a green kid," he came back. "But I learned a lot on the inside. They won't catch up with me again. And I could put you onto some good things."

"I don't want any part of it. Whatever you're doing, I don't even want to know about it."

"You always were chicken, Paul," he said. "But okay, it's your loss. When I'm king of the rackets you can pretend not to know me."

The flaw in that was our strong family resemblance. We both had corn-yellow hair, long thin faces, and what our mother al-

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ways referred to as the "Garrison nose." The boss came in one night just as Joe was leaving and did a double take. The $200 suit and $40 shoes must have made him suspect for a minute that I'd been dipping into the till. Then he saw it wasn't me and breathed easier.

"The fellow who just went out," he said, "he must be your brother."

"That's right."

"So you got a rich relation. That's nice."

For a while he treated me with more respect. Which was fine until Joe was trapped with a closet full of heroin and his picture hit all the front pages. That's when I lost my job.

"Not that I hold a man's family against him," the boss apologized. "It's just that the picture looks so much like you. So the customers think I got a pusher in charge here. Well, Garrison, you see my problem."

I saw his problem and my own as well. The trial drew a lot of publicity and when I got on a bus the people would look at me and nudge each other. I was going with Lucille then and it was her idea that we should get married right away and leave town. I hadn't planned on an early marriage, but I liked the idea of a fresh start.

So we bought a license, took our tests, said the right words in front of a judge, and drove 800 miles to settle in a bigger city in another state where the Garrison name and Garrison nose were unknown. Two weeks after we left, Joe was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in a Federal prison. It was seven years before I saw him again.

I was sitting in the dining room of the Juniper Street house on Saturday evening about ten o'clock. Lucille had gone to bed early, sneezing and sniffling and complaining of a sore throat. The dinner dishes were stacked in the sink and the table was covered with papers—bills, tax forms, dunning letters. It was a bleak picture that had begun to take shape two years earlier when we bought this house.

Lucille had social aspirations she thought would be helped by moving to a more fashionable address. And that meant better furniture and more expensive clothes. But she didn't make any friends in the new neighborhood and all I got out of it was a mountain of debt. Now the mortgage payment was overdue and two stores had turned our accounts over to a collection agency. I

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was about to be sued, garnished, and foreclosed.

But that wasn't the worst of it. In my job I collected rents for an apartment management firm. Some of the tenants paid in cash and when I was hard pressed I used that money, then made it up from the following week's collections. Until now, by careful juggling, I'd managed to stay ahead of the game. But the auditor was about to check the books and I was nearly $1000 short. I could lose my job, maybe face criminal charges.

I'd get no sympathy from Lucille, that was certain. In her view it wasn't her extravagance that had caused our trouble but my inability to earn a decent living. So I was jotting down fresh columns of figures, adding and subtacting, and finding no hope anywhere. I was staring dismally at the numbers when the doorbell rang. Newsboy, I thought, after my last bit of change. I opened the door to find Joe on the porch.

"What—how—" Shock made me stammer.

"Call me a bad penny." He was as jaunty as ever. "I always keep turning up. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Yes, of course." I stepped back to let him come in, then closed the door. "What's happened? You didn't break out?"

"No way. I got my time off for being a good boy."

"Why didn't you let me know?" We'd exchanged infrequent letters. His last had been several months earlier.

"I love a surprise." He followed me back into the dining room and surveyed the clutter of papers. "Looks like you're still making it the hard way."

"If you need money," I began defensively, "I'd like to help you, but you've come at a bad time."

"Don't worry about little Joe." He reached inside his coat and pulled out a stack of bills. The one on the outside was a fifty. It was like old times. "To tell the truth, I had a touch in mind when I decided to look you up, but I ran into some luck on the way here. Now I'm in good shape."

"Maybe I should ask you for a loan." I tried to make it sound like a joke.

"Sorry, I need it all where I'm going." He returned the bills to his inside pocket.

"Where's that?"

"New York. I've friends there who'll put me back in business. But I can't make contact till Monday night, so I figured there was time for a family reunion."

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"How did you find the house?"

"Easy. I studied the map in the railroad station and got a bus that dropped me two blocks away. Looks like a nice part of town. You're living high."

"Too high," I admitted. "I'm in way over my head. But you didn't come to hear my troubles. Are you hungry?"

"I ate on the train. But a Scotch would taste good right now. With just a little water."

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing in the house. Lucille doesn't—"

As if summoned by her name, Lucille appeared in the doorway. She was in her nightgown and held a pink cotton wrapper clutched tight around her middle.

"The bell woke me," she complained. "What's going on?" Her eyes rested on Joe's face, then narrowed in recognition. "You must be Paul's brother. When did you get out of jail?"

"Pleased to meet you, sister," he mocked. "You really know how to make a guy feel welcome."

"Don't think you can lay about here," she said. "You ruined the last town for us. You're not doing it again."

"Cool off, sister. I'm just passing through."

"He wants money, I suppose." She turned her anger on me. "Well, he's not going to get it. If you give him one single cent—"

"Damn it, I don't have one single cent." I waved at the table. "All I've got is bills and nothing to pay them with."

"Don't yell at me, Paul Garrison. I'm a sick woman. It's bad enough you're related to a convict without bringing him into my house. You send him on his way, you understand. At once!"

She spun round and headed back upstairs. Joe watched her go and the curl of his lips made me conscious of how quickly her girlish plumpness had turned to fat. Without makeup, her hair unkempt, she was an especially unlovely sight.

"You got yourself a charmer," he said. "If I had your problems I'd buy a nice big insurance policy. On the lady's life."

"I already have a policy. We're both insured."

"Then I'd take steps to collect it."

"That's not funny, Joe."

"Who's joking? Okay, big brother, I'll save my advice for somebody smart enough to listen. Now how about it? You going to throw me out?"

"You can spend the night, of course. But there's no need for Lucille to know."

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We sat on talking for an hour or so. Then I made up the cot in the television room for Joe to sleep on and went upstairs. Lucille heard me coming and switched on the bedside lamp, ready to pounce, as I entered the room. "Is he gone?"

"He's my brother, Lu. I can't send him away in the middle of the night."

"I'm your wife, but that doesn't stop you from piling on aggravations. You know what my temperature is? A hundred and two! I've got fever and chills and my head is splitting. I won't be able to go to the concert tomorrow."

"That's too bad."

"Don't sound so happy. It won't get you out of going. At least you can bring home a program and tell me about the music."

"All right," I agreed, "if that's what you want. Maybe I can get a refund on your ticket."

Five bucks, I thought, to put in a pot that was $1000 short. The concert was the fourth in a series that Lucille had insisted on buying. I don't think she liked the longhair stuff any better than I did, but Culture was one of the rungs on her social ladder. So far all it had gotten her was a listing on the back of the program as a "friend" of the local symphony.

I got into bed but was a long time falling asleep. Joe's remark had put Lucille's insurance in my mind and I couldn't get it out. $10,000. More than enough to sweep away all my debts. Maybe what she had was more than a cold, worse than the flu. Maybe her temperature would keep rising, turn into pneumonia. I thought of raising the windows high to let in the March wind and help it along. But that was fantasy. Lucille was strong as a horse. She'd live to collect on my policy, not vice versa.

But the idea, having formed, kept nagging at me. By the time I dropped off, near dawn, I had worked out a plan to the smallest detail. Having a look-alike brother had caused me nothing but trouble in the past. At last I could make it work to my advantage.

By morning Lucille had added a hacking cough to her other symptoms. I carried her breakfast up on a tray and then told Joe my plan. He was all for it.

"You'll have to stay out of sight till evening," I explained, "and then sit through the first half of the concert in my place. After that the sooner you get out of town the better."

"That suits me fine," he said. "I've got my own reasons for not wanting to go out while it's light."

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I divided the day between fetching and carrying for Lucille and probing my plan for possible pitfalls.

"I can pass for you among strangers," Joe pointed out. "But what if one of your seatmates tries to start a conversation?"

"They won't. There are a couple of old biddies on the aisle who don't even talk to each other. And the couple on the other side hasn't given us so much as a kind look since the series began. All you have to do is sit still and listen to the orchestra."

"That's another thing. What if the cops ask you about what they played. You can't expect music criticism from me."

"Of course not. My friends all know I can't tell Bach from Bacharach, that I just go to these things to humor Lucille. If the conductor has a fit or the cello catches fire, I'll need to know about it. Otherwise I can say I dozed through it all."

Joe spent an hour or so rubbing out his fingerprints and making sure the house showed no trace of his presence. Lucille, when she wasn't eating or sleeping or harassing me, passed her time on the phone talking to friends on the other side of town, where we used to live. When I was dressing for the concert, a dangerous thought occurred to me.

"Uh—Lu—" I approached the subject cautiously. "The people you talked to today—did you say anything about Joe's being here?"

"You think a jailbird brother-in-law is something to boast about?" She laughed hoarsely. "I've never even told anybody you have a brother."

Reassured, I shrugged into my purple and green checked sports jacket.

"You think you're going to the ballpark?" she shrilled. "That's no kind of coat for the symphony. You'll stand out like a sore thumb."

Which was exactly why I chose it. I adjusted the coat, straightened my tie, and said nothing.

Joe and I left the house at 7:30. It was a 20-minute drive to the Civic Auditorium and I had worked out a very exact timetable. At 7:50 I slid out of the car to let Joe take the wheel and circle the block. I went directly to the box office and told the man behind the wicket the sad story of my wife's illness. He had me write my name on a piece of paper, clipped it to Lucille's ticket, and said if anybody bought it I could get my money back. Then I went outside and waited for Joe to pick me up.

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I traded my brightly colored jacket for his tan topcoat on a side street. Then Joe walked back to the auditorium and I drove home. I parked half a block away and walked the rest of the distance. Except for our bedroom the house was dark, just as I'd left it. I went in through the garage, which wasn't locked. It was exactly 8:22.

Like clockwork, I thought, and moved to the kitchen phone. Focusing my pocket flash on the dial, I called one of our old neighbors.

"Janet, this is Paul Garrison," I explained. "I'm at the auditorium and the concert is about to start. But Lucille's home with a bad cold and feeling pretty depressed. It might cheer her up to have a call from you."

"A fine time to be thinking of her," she responded tartly, "when you've left her all alone." Her opinion of me, based on Lucille's complaints, wasn't high. "If you're so worried, why didn't you stay with her?"

"I wanted to, but she insisted on my attending this concert. But I didn't call to argue. I just thought it would do her good to hear from an old friend. If you'd rather not be bothered—"

"Of course I'll call her," she bristled. "You just go ahead and enjoy yourself."

I put down the phone and, at the bottom of the stairs, stepped out of my shoes. As I did so, the phone rang. Good old Janet, fitting right into the plan. Up till then I'd been so absorbed in working out the minute-by-minute plan that I hadn't really thought about the end toward which it was all heading. Now suddenly it struck me. I was about to walk up these stairs and murder my wife.

It was a crazy idea, I told myself, a nightmare. I couldn't go through with it. Upstairs Lucille answered the phone. I moved higher till her voice, the whine louder than ever, was clear.

"That's right, Janet, he's gone off and left me alone. A lot he cares that I'm so sick I can hardly lift my head . . . His own pleasure, that's all that matters . . . Ho, that's not the half of it. If you knew what I put up with, day after day. . ."

The words and tone stiffened my resolve. I moved faster, crushing down thought till I was outside the bedroom door. Then I leaned against the wall, slid my gloved hand around the edge till it touched the switch, and turned off the light.

"Something's happened." Lucille's first reaction was unalarmed.

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"The light just went out, must be a fuse. Janet, I hear something—somebody—a burglar—oh, my God, he's coming for me—Janet, get help—hurry!"

I was on her then, my fingers round her throat. From the receiver she dropped came squawking sounds as Janet kept asking what was wrong, what was going on. I held tight, pressed hard with both thumbs till she went limp and there was no life left in her. Then I let her fall back on the bed and stood for a minute, disoriented.

My teeth began to chatter. Got to get out, I told myself. Get away before Janet sends the police. But I couldn't move, couldn't make my body respond. I gulped air, finally got myself under control and ran from the room.

I was all the way to the garage when I remembered I was still in my stockinged feet and went back for my shoes. Then I was off again, out the door, running for my car. But when I got behind the wheel, my hand was shaking so I could hardly get the key in the ignition.

Take it easy, I told myself. Janet's got to make the call, get her message across. The nearest precinct is a mile away. All I have to do is drive two blocks and lose myself in the boulevard traffic.

But what had seemed so safe before the murder was now full of perils. There might be a squad car cruising nearby. They could get word by radio and catch me before I left the neighborhood. Even when I was on the boulevard, one car among hundreds, my imagination continued to create hazards. What if I had engine trouble, an accident, a flat tire. The way my heart was pounding, I could have an attack. The smallest mishap could prevent my getting back to the auditorium, destroy my alibi.

I drove with extraordinary care, below the posted limit, and stopped at lights that were barely yellow. Although I longed to push the accelerator to the floor, I couldn't risk a ticket. It seemed that hours must have elapsed since I parted from Joe, but when I finally turned into the auditorium's parking area my watch said 9:10.

The lot was unlighted and unattended. I stopped in the corner farthest from the building's side exit and waited. Faint sounds of music came from inside. What if I'd misjudged the time? The first half of the program might have been unusually short. Maybe the intermission was already over. Janet knew where I was. If she sent the police to the concert hall, they'd find Joe in my seat and

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me outside. In that interminable time of waiting, every mistake I might have made, everything that could possibly go wrong, passed through my mind.

Then there was a crescendo of sound as the music rose to a peak, faded out, and was followed by applause. Light flashed as the side door opened to let out the people in urgent need of a cigarette. Some formed in groups, others smoked alone. It was simple for Joe to ease off into the shadows and reach the far side of the car where I was waiting to give him his coat and reclaim my jacket.

"All okay at your end?" he asked.

I nodded. I didn't want to talk about it.

"Nothing to report about the music. Except it was noisy. I stepped hard on an old dame's foot getting to my seat. The one in the flowered hat. She knows you were there all right. And while I was waiting for the show to start I got a Scotch and water from the bar near the front door. Paid for it with a fifty and nearly cleaned out the girl's drawer."

"You did what?" I stared at him, aghast.

"It was a way to make an impression," he said, "and get you one more good witness. Besides, I needed change."

"Why the devil couldn't you stick to your instructions and not go off half—" I cut myself short. What was done was done and I was wasting time. "Did you add any other embellishments, talk to anybody, do anything else to attract attention?"

"Nope. All else was according to plan."

The light over the exit went off and on twice, signaling the end of the intermission. Joe stayed near the edge of the lot, moving swiftly through the dark to the street. He had plenty of time to walk to the terminal and catch an eastbound bus. I strolled casually back to mingle with the smokers and enter the building.

The woman in the seat second from the aisle pulled her feet back and glared at me as I slid past her. Her hat was heavy with cabbage roses. Unquestionably the one stepped on by Joe. I gave her an apologetic smile which she didn't return, then picked up the program Joe had left on the seat and sat down. The man on the other side ignored me as usual. I opened the program and stared at the dates of Mozart's birth and death while the musicians reassembled on stage.

I heard hardly more of the second half of the concert than I had of the first. The only thing in the hall of which I was fully aware

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was Lucille's empty seat. Most of my thoughts were on Juniper street, trying to visualize what was happening there. Had the police come yet? What were they doing?

As soon as the last chord died away and the applause began, I forced my way past the rose-hatted lady and her companion. No need to stay for encores. A professed non-music lover with an ailing wife would logically be among the first to leave.

Driving home I braced myself for what lay ahead, the role I had to play. The house was a blaze of lights. Two cars were parked in front, a third was in the driveway. Blocked from the garage, I stopped behind one of the cars and walked toward the front porch with what I hoped was a suitable expression of puzzled concern. A man in uniform met me at the door.

"What's happened?" I asked him. "Where's my wife?"

"You Mr. Garrison?"

I nodded.

"Lieutenant!" He moved to the foot of the stairs and called up. "The husband's here. You want him?"

"Keep him there. I'll be right down."

The interview with Lieutenant Thurmond was easier than I feared. He broke the news gently and I reacted with shock, grief, and strong desire for vengeance. He asked for an account of my evening and I told him about the concert. His major interest, I was relieved to find, lay in the fact that, because of my job, I often kept large amounts of cash in the house over weekends.

"I do a lot of collecting on Saturdays," I explained, "when the tenants are at home. And I can't turn the money in until Monday."

"How many people know that?"

"Everyone I work with, of course. And the families I collect from. Plus anybody they tell about it." Purposely I offered him a wide field of suspects.

"And you go to these concerts on Sunday nights. Do people know that, too?"

"It's no secret."

"So somebody could have counted on coming into an empty house with a clear couple of hours to hunt for the dough. When he found your wife in the bedroom, he must have panicked."

"I suppose that's how it was," I agreed. "I should have stayed home with Lucille. I shouldn't have let her push me into going to that concert."

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"You two get along okay?" The question was overly casual. "No problems?"

"We had our ups and downs." It was better for him to hear it first from me. "The usual arguments."

"I see. Well, I'll be frank with you, Mr. Garrison. We'll have to check out your story. But we know your wife was on the phone a little before half-past eight and that's when the attack came. So if we can confirm that you were in the hall when the concert started, you'll be in the clear."

"You've got to find him," I said vehemently. "Whoever did this to Lucille, he's got to be caught and punished."

For a long time people continued to come and go—police, technical men, some reporters. But at last the body was taken to the morgue, the questions were all asked, and I was alone. I went to bed thinking I was over the highest hurdle. Burglary was firmly established as a motive and the investigation would stay on that track until they finally wrote it off as one more unsolved crime.

The next afternoon, however, Thurmond returned with a changed attitude. Sympathy for a bereaved husband was displaced by harshness toward a prime suspect. The reason quickly became obvious. They'd been probing my financial affairs.

"You've held out on your firm, Garrison," he accused. "The books show you've collected $960 more than you've turned in."

"I'm a little behind," I admitted.

"You're also behind on your mortgage, your taxes, and a few other things."

"The last few months have been tough."

"But the future looks brighter, doesn't it? That ten grand insurance will solve all your problems."

"What are you insinuating?"

"Not a thing. I'm stating a fact. Your wife's death can pull you out of a deep hole. And another fact—her best friends say you had a very bad relationship."

"Even if that's true," I challenged, "what of it? You know when the murder happened and I was miles from here. Or have you been too busy listening to gossip to check on my story?"

"No, we've done that, too. The symphony subscription list gave us the names of those who hold the adjoining seats and we've seen them all. The people behind you don't recall whether your seat was occupied. The man on the right says the seat beside him was empty."

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"That's Lucille's seat," I said. "I was in the next one."

"Well, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Carlson noticed you. They said they go to hear music, not to socialize."

"What about the women on my left? Haven't you been able to locate them?"

"The Misses Grant. Yes, we talked to them."

"They must remember me. Especially the one with the fancy hat. I accidentally stepped on her foot on the way in."

"She remembers that all right. But she says it happened after they came back from the intermission."

"She's crazy. It was at the beginning, before the concert started. I sat through the whole damn thing. And what about the man in the box office? He has to know I was there early. He still has the ticket I turned in."

"That's right, he does. Also a paper with your name in your own handwriting and a notation of the time you turned it in. That places you in the auditorium at 7:55. And the intermission ended at 9:35. That leaves about an hour and a half unaccounted for, Garrison. And we clocked the round trip from the auditorium at no more than forty-five minutes. So your alibi isn't worth much."

"It is if the Grant woman can get her facts straight. Look, she's old and easily confused. She's mixed up the times. Let me talk to her. I'll make her remember it the way it was."

"How do you figure to do that, Garrison? With a threat or a bribe?"

"All I want her to do is tell the truth."

"The truth is what we're after, too," he said. "But what we've got is a set of witnesses who say maybe you were there, maybe you weren't. They won't swear to it either way."

It can't be happening, I told myself. All my careful plans falling apart because of a bunch of highbrow snobs and an addlepated old woman. I wished Joe had broken her instep. As things stood, he might as well have been invisible. Unless—suddenly I remembered one other thing.

"Wait a minute," I said. "There's somebody else who saw me. The girl who sells drinks. I bought a Scotch and water to kill time before the concert."

"Yeah?" He was skeptical. "You think she remembers all her customers?"

"She should me. I gave her a big bill—a fifty. She had a hard time making change."

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Thurmond made some notes and went away. I didn't hear from him again till the next morning. On the phone he was noncommittal, simply asked me to come to his office as soon as possible.

I drove downtown in a fever of emotion. Maybe the bargirl had amnesia. Maybe Joe bought the drink too soon, while there was still time for me to reach home before 8:30. Or maybe, by a return of luck, she had told her story and gotten me off the hook.

At headquarters I was taken directly to the lieutenant's office. He motioned me to a chair and looked me up and down with a hard stare I couldn't interpret.

"You got a good break, Garrison," he told me. "We've a statement from the bargirl. She said she usually opens her stand a half hour before the concert. But Sunday she was late, didn't get set up till ten past. So there was a rush of business all at once."

"And she—does she remember me?"

"She remembers having to make change for a fifty. We showed her your picture and she couldn't swear to the face. But she said the guy had on a coat with loud checks. Green and purple."

"That's me." I was nearly babbling with relief. "That's the coat I wore Sunday night. You saw it, too."

"Yes, I saw it."

"Then you know I'm innocent. If I bought a drink from her after 8:10, I couldn't have killed my wife at 8:30."

"That's right, you couldn't." He took something from a drawer and laid it on the desk in front of me. It was a fifty-dollar bill. "That was the only fifty in the girl's box. In fact, she said it's the first time she'd taken in anything bigger than a twenty. You recognize it?"

"How can I? All bills look alike."

"This one's a little different. See that corner. It got torn and somebody taped it back together."

I looked closer, saw the jagged place under transparent tape. "It must have been that way when I got it."

"Where did you get it, Garrison?"

"I was out collecting on Saturday. I told you, I take in a lot of cash."

"And appropriate it to your own use?"

"Is that what you're trying to pin on me now? Embezzling funds?"

"This is homicide, Garrison, not a case of petty graft. All I want is to make sure that fifty came from you."

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"If it's the only one the girl had, it must be mine." I hesitated, stared at the bill. I was too close to safety to let myself be snagged on some technicality. And as I looked at it, the picture of the stack of bills Joe had waved came back to me. There had been, I was sure of it, a taped corner on the outside bill.

"Yes," I said, "come to think of it, there was a patch like that on my fifty."

"Then that ties the last knot." He seemed as pleased as I was by the outcome. "Your alibi is airtight. You can give us a signed statement and we'll get back on the trail of your wife's killer."

He called in a stenographer to take down my account of the events of Sunday evening.

"That's the crucial point," Thurmond prompted me when I told about buying a drink. "Better describe the bill."

So I mentioned the taped corner, sure now that I had seen it in Joe's hand, and finished the story with a sense of being home free. After that there was a short wait for the statement to be typed. I read it through, added my signature, and was ready to leave. The lieutenant came with me.

"Not that elevator," he said as I turned toward the one that had brought me up. "They're working on it. Better use the one on the south side."

We walked together down the long corridor and rounded a corner to face a bench with two people on it. One was a plump woman with straggly gray hair.

"That's him," she yelled, and was on me in a flash, pounding my chest with her fists. "You devil, you! You killed my Carl."

"All right, Mrs. Harley." The man left the bench and came up behind to pull her off me. "Take it easy, ma'am. You sure this is the man?"

"What's the matter with her?" I backed off, baffled.

Thurmond's attention was on the woman. "Take a good look, Mrs. Harley," he told her. "Can you make positive identification?"

"You think I ever forget that big nose, that dirty blond hair. I saw him hit Carl, smash him with the end of his gun." She fixed her eyes on my face and said quietly, "You didn't have to do that. He'd have let you take the money. You didn't have to kill him."

"Okay, Bruckner." Thurmond said. "You can take Mrs. Harley home. We have all we need."

"What's going on?" I demanded. "What's she got to do with me?"

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"Her husband owned the liquor store by the railroad station—the one you took nine hundred bucks out of on Saturday night. You didn't know she was in the back room, but she got a clear view of you."

"You trying to frame me? I've never been near her liquor store!"

"No? You got an alibi for Saturday, too?"

"I was at home all evening with my wife."

"Unfortunately, she's not here to testify. Look, Garrison, we've got you cold. We know you were in desperate need of money. We have Mrs. Harley's identification and the fifty-dollar bill."

"The fifty—"

"You didn't collect that from a tenant. You took it out of the store's cash register. Mrs. Harley patched it up herself and put it back in the drawer a few minutes before you came in. She even showed us her roll of tape. It matches, Garrison. And that's the bill you used to pay for your drink."

"I didn't. It's all a horrible mistake."

"Maybe you've got a double?" His voice dripped sarcasm.

That's right, I wanted to shout. I've got a double. My brother Joe's the man you're looking for. He has a record, you can look it up. The liquor store robbery was the "luck" he said he'd run into on the way to my place. That's where he got the money he showed off.

Joe killed the old man, not me. How long, I wondered, would it take the police to put it all together, figure out that it was Joe, not me, who bought the drink and sat in my seat at the Sunday concert.

I had, it appeared, a choice of murders. To keep still and let them nail me with Joe's. Or speak up and be convicted of my own.

"Well, Garrison," Thurmond urged, "Why not make it easy for yourself and confess?"

I opened my mouth, closed it again. There was nothing I could say.

"Q"

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Barry Perowne

The Raffles Hunt

The Real McRaffles—beautifully executed and as smooth and suave and mellow as Harvey's Bristol Cream (founded 1796) . . . join A. J. Raffles, famous cricketer and infamous cracksman, as he takes part in a Foxhunt, attends a Hunt Ball, plays in a cricket match, and as a "gentleman of prey," stalks the valuable D'Arzac Coronet . . .

Criminal: A. J. RAFFLES

Through the glades of the New Forest, early one winter morning, sounded the note of a hunting-horn and the belling clamour of an eager pack.

"King Rufus's Foxhounds," said A. J. Raffles. "We're late for the Meet, Bunny!"

We quickened our hired horses to a canter through the oak wood and found ourselves in a clearing where a timeworn stone slab reared shoulder-high from a drift of dead leaves. Nearby, on a small grey mare, sat a man with a small grey beard. Pink-coated, like ourselves, he stood up in his stirrups and raised his rather rusty tophat to us.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, as we reined in, raising our own well-burnished toppers. "The Hunt's moved off, but I saw you coming, so I waited for you. I'm Habbakuk Hooper, the Hunt Secretary. I fancy you're the visiting Londoners, Mr. Raffles and Mr. Manders, who're lodging at the Shergold cottage?"

"We saw the accommodation advertised, sir," Raffles said, "with a promise of fox-hunting."

"Indeed, yes. We of the Hunt are always pleased to have visitors contribute their guinea apiece for a day with the hounds. Ah, thank you," said Habbakuk Hooper, as we produced the wherewithal from the pockets of our white cord breeches. "This is a special day—the twenty-first birthday of our Master of

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Foxhounds' daughter, Miss Philippa Morton, and your contributions make you welcome guests at the Hunt Ball this evening at the seat of the Darsey Mortons. Meantime, behold The Rufus Stone, where the Hunt met just now."

Waving his riding-crop at the timeworn stone slab, he read aloud in a high, pedantic voice its partially defaced inscription:

" 'On this spot stood the Oak Tree from which an Arrow, shot by Sir Walter Tyrrel at a Stag, glanced and struck King William Rufus in the Breast, whereof he Instantly Died, on the Second Day of August, A.D. Eleven Hundred.' "

Through the brooding glades sounded again the note of the horn, more distant.

"Our Master of Foxhounds," continued Mr. Hooper, as we rode on our way, "is himself of Norman stock. His forbears were the Counts D'Arzac-de-Mortain—their name rendered into our bluff English tongue as Darsey Morton. You'll have heard tell, perhaps, of the D'Arzac Coronet?"

"Coronet?" said Raffles.

"The line Count of the D'Arzac line in Normandy," said Habbakuk Hooper, "bequeathed the Coronet to the English branch of the family, with the proviso that a custom of the D'Arzacs be perpetuated—namely, that on the eldest daughter in each generation reaching her twenty-first birthday, the Coronet be presented to her, in trust. And tonight at The Moot Hall, seat of the family, you'll see our M.F.H., Sir Darsey Morton, Baronet, place the Coronet on the head of his daughter Philippa—to her secret dread."

"Dread?" Raffles and I said simultaneously.

"The Coronet," said Mr. Hooper, "has brought only misfortune and catastrophe to all the daughters of the house who in turn have inherited it. Gentlemen, take note of Miss Philippa to-day. Watch her take her fences. You'll see a girl of courage. She dreads this evening's ceremony, but she'll not evade it."

"If her father knows she dreads it," Raffles said, "why doesn't he spare her this experience?"

"Because he despises superstition—or claims to," said Habbakuk Hooper. "I say 'claims to' because he loves his daughter dearly. And, gentlemen, I've often thought it significant that, despite the great intrinsic value of the Coronet, Sir Darsey keeps it in a mere glass-doored Chippendale bureau in his study. Doesn't such lack of elementary precaution betray an urge to tempt

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Providence—a secret hope, subtle and perhaps unadmitted to himself, in the heart of our M.F.H.? I fancy so!"

My scalp tingled. In all my life I had never heard, innocently given, so open an invitation to A. J. Raffles, gentleman of prey. I dared not look at him as we rode out now from the oak glades on to open heath.

Under heavy clouds, bespoked by the rays of a sullen sunrise, undulations of winedark heather, dotted here and there by Forest ponies, rolled away to the horizon, and before us a grit road sloped down to the roofs, mostly thatched, of a village that straggled widely about a steepled church.

"Brackenbourne," said Habbakuk Hooper, "and there's the Hunt, gentlemen, taking the first of its five stirrup-cups!"

"Five, Mr. Hooper?"

"When the Meet's at The Rufus Stone, Mr. Raffles, it's a Hunt tradition to pass through this nearby village of Brackenbourne and take a stirrup-cup at each of its five inns. I may add that I'm by way of being the local artist. I designed and painted the inn signs myself, and their modest size and consistent style has been favourably commented upon by the County newspaper."

Nevertheless, as we tailed on to the Hunt and I glanced up at the inn sign—The Hawk and Heron—which depended on hooks from a beam protruding from the inn's low, thatched eaves, I could not help wondering if Mr. Hooper was not perhaps a more accomplished Hunt Secretary than artist, though obviously he painted from a lavish palette.

We were too late for a stirrup-cup at The Hawk and Heron, for the Hunt was moving on—the pack of tan-and-white eager hounds, the male riders mostly pink-coated, the ladies black-habited and tophatted in their side-saddles, and the villagers, looking on excitedly, in their rustic motley.

"A great turn-out for this Birthday Hunt," said Habbakuk Hooper. "There rides our M.F.H., gentlemen—the tall, grey-moustached man on the chestnut, with his Huntsman riding beside him. And there, Mr. Raffles, Mr. Manders, is our birthday girl! Ah, hah, see how that great roan stallion of hers kicks and prances! Javelin's feeling his oats this morning. Miss Philippa's three chevaliers had best keep their distance. Not that they will, of course! They'd ride through fire and brimstone to keep at her side!"

I saw that the three fine-looking fellows so hazardously atten-

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dant on the slender, dark-haired girl in the side-saddle of the temperamental roan were in Army uniform.

"Officers," Habbakuk Hooper explained, "from the County garrison. The one in scarlet is Major Hector Barron, of the Lancers. The one in artilleryman's dark-blue and gold is Captain Hugh Archibald. And the handsome chap in Rifle Brigade bottle-green with black buttons is Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross. They bring their own chargers and batman-grooms with them and spend the night at the village here—in different inns, I may say, for they're at daggers drawn over Miss Philippa."

Mr. Hooper chuckled a shade maliciously. "To-day may be the last chance any one of them has to get her, for they're all three on stand-by orders to embark for India."

The Hunt paused again at another thatched inn on the road that curved through the village. Under the sign of The Coronation Arms, with its dangling portrait none too recognisable as the recently crowned King Edward VII, the beaming landlord and his buxom spouse awaited us with laden trays.

This time I got a stirrup-cup, which proved to be sherry, a passable *amontillado*. When the Hunt moved on to The Bellringers Inn, near the church and the village green, we got sherry again, a good *manzanilla;* and at The Speckled Trout it was sherry once more, a nutty *oloroso*. But at The Bugle Boys we got a rum punch that set the hunting blood coursing hotly through my veins as, to the cheers of the local gaffers and hobbledehoys, hounds and riders began to stream on out of the village.

"I fancy, Mr. Raffles, Mr. Manders," said Habbakuk Hooper, "that Sir Darsey'll draw the Driftway first. An artful dog fox often lurks there, licking his cynical whiskers at us from the coverts. Ah, hah, yes! Excellent! Sir Darsey's heading for the Driftway!"

To the note of the horn, the Birthday Hunt surged out over the heathland, the hounds with their tails well up and their noses well down, in quest of the Driftway fox.

Unfortunately, we found him. And so gruelling was the run which he gave us, before he went mockingly to earth in a chalkpit on the downs fifteen miles away, that I ached in every muscle and, that evening, did my utmost to get out of going to the Hunt Ball, birthday or no birthday.

But Raffles insisted, with the result that, in the fine old ballroom of The Moot Hall, seat of the Darsey Morton family, I had

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to grit my teeth and, despite my aches and fundamental soreness, dance with a succession of ladies. I had just escorted one of them back to her chair when I found Mr. Hooper, in vintage evening-dress, at my side.

"Ah, hah, Mr. Manders! An animated scene, is it not? Did you notice the way Miss Philippa put her horse Javelin at that dangerous gate to the Driftway covert?"

"I did indeed, Mr. Hooper. My own horse refused it—so emphatically that I fell off."

"Yes, I saw you cut a voluntary there. Yet how boldly Miss Philippa sailed over it! Confidence is all, Mr. Manders," said Habbakuk Hooper. "A little sad, is it not, that from the moment she receives her birthday gift Miss Philippa will no longer feel such carefree confidence."

Thus reminded of the D'Arzac Coronet, I glanced hastily around the ballroom for a glimpse of Raffles amid the revels. To the lilt of the orchestra in the minstrels' gallery above the double doors standing wide open to the panelled hall, the dancers wove their vivid kaleidoscope.

Misgiving seized me. Raffles was conspicuous by his absence.

"Miss Philippa this evening," said Habbakuk Hooper, "is as beautiful as some raven-haired damsel at the Love Court of Margaret of Navarre. It's the blood, you know—the Norman strain, Mr. Manders. Yet is she not a little pale, a little tense, as she dances there in the arms of the dashing Lancer, jealously watched by the gallant Gunner and the noble Rifleman? Poor girl, I fancy so! The ceremony looms very close now. Ah, hah, I see Sir Darsey talking to the Chief Constable of the County—an honoured guest and firm supporter of the Hunt, Mr. Manders. I must go and shake him by the hand. Pray excuse me."

Left alone, I took out my handkerchief to mop my palms, suddenly damp—and I saw Raffles. He appeared from the hall. His dark hair crisp, his evening-dress immaculate, he paused casually in the wide doorway. His grey eyes surveyed the dancers as he took a Sullivan from his cigarette-case.

I started towards him, to demand where the devil he had been, but he noticed a neglected lady, returned the cigarette to his case, approached her with a bow, and escorted her gracefully into the maze of the schottische.

As I stood dismayed, a tinkling sound from the hall caught my attention. It was the tinkling, faintly audible through the music,

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of champagne glasses on super-trolleys wheeled by a bevy of fresh-faced parlour-maids. Marshalled by the butler, the trolleys bore a sumptuous collation. Alone in its glory on one of them was a fine birthday cake bearing twenty-one unlighted candles.

The butler came into the ballroom for a quiet word with Sir Darsey. The tall, grey-moustached M.F.H., in his hunting-pink dinner-coat, accompanied the butler into the hall. Standing as I was at an angle to the doorway, I saw Sir Darsey cross the hall, open a door, close it behind him.

The ceremony was indeed imminent. I knew that he must have gone into his study to get the D'Arzac Coronet from the glass-doored Chippendale bureau. My heart thumped. Premonition curdled in me.

The study door opened. Sir Darsey came out. The butler handed him a lighted taper. Sir Darsey touched the flame to each of the twenty-one candles, returned the taper to the butler, came into the ballroom and, looking up at the minstrels' gallery, raised an arresting hand.

The violins fell abruptly silent. Expectant, the dancers made way for the M.F.H. to walk to the centre of the floor. He looked around at us.

"My friends," he said quietly, "I know you're all anticipating an ancient custom of this house to be observed here to-night. That ceremony will not take place. I have to tell you that the D'Arzac Coronet has disappeared."

Dead silence. Then a harsh voice: "Sir Darsey, I suggest that the outer doors be immediately locked and a search organized of everybody present."

"My dear Chief Constable," Sir Darsey said, "whatever unknown hand has been at work here tonight, I am unalterably convinced that it was not the hand of any guest under my roof. What has happened—has happened. It must not be allowed to spoil what remaines to be celebrated—for it comes but once in a lifetime."

He beckoned toward the doorway. And the butler entered, wheeling the trolley bearing the cake with its lighted candles, followed by the line of smiling parlourmaids. Voices buzzed, corks popped, the bubbly fizzed. Philippa, radiant, the shadow lifted from her life, blew out the candles and cut the cake. Her father kissed her—and we raised our glasses to her, one and all of us:

"Many happy returns!"

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As we drank, spurred boots stamped in the doorway. We all looked that way. There stood, stiffly at attention, a man in mud-spattered uniform, helmet clamped under his arm, on his sleeve the gold stripes of a sergeant and the crossed flags of the Corps of Signals. His voice rang loud in the sudden hush: "Dispatches for Major Barron, Captain Archibald, and Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross."

The three officers went to him and he handed each of them an envelope from the pouch on his belt. They tore open the envelopes.

"India," said Major Barron. "Sir Darsey—Philippa—I'm so sorry. It's immediate embarkation from Southampton."

Father and daughter accompanied the three officers into the hall. And as a hubbub of voices broke out, one said softly in my ear, "And when he got there, the cupboard was bare—and so the poor dog had none."

I met Raffles' eyes. Vivacity danced in them.

"Which of them was it, Bunny? Which of them, with the same motive as myself, got to the D'Arzac Coronet before me—the dashing Lancer, the gallant Gunner, or the noble Rifleman?"

Summer came to the New Forest. In mid-July, when the deep glades were in full leaf and the pony-trails which meandered over the heaths were dust-white under a quiver of heat-currents, Raffles and I returned there at the invitation of Mr. Habbakuk Hooper.

Besides being the Hunt Secretary, he also was Secretary of the New Forest cricket club, The Rufus Stonemen, and he wrote inviting the pair of us—though the one he really wanted was A. J. Raffles, well-known as a cricketer—to turn out for the team against a County Eleven in the cause of Queen Alexandra's charities.

It was a Sunday afternoon match played on the village green alongside Brackenbourne church, with the usual cider-drenched convivialities afterwards at The Bellringers Inn. The night was dark when Raffles and I emerged from the inn. We were putting up again at the Shergold cottage, and, still in our blazers, white flannels, and cricket boots, we mounted the bicycles we had borrowed from Mr. Shergold and his son.

There were no lamps on the bikes and, as we freewheeled round a bend in the dark lane through the woods, an ambling pony and

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her foal suddenly loomed up before us. I swerved to avoid the foal and, my night sight perhaps a shade impaired by cider, ran into a pedestrian and knocked him for six.

He seemed to be some kind of tramp and, though we helped him up and dusted him off, he did not take the trifling mishap in a sporting spirit.

"No bloody lamps!" he snarled. "Skylarkin' bleedin' cricketers!"

"Never mind," said Raffles. "You shall have a quid to soothe your feelings and a drink to brace you up. Come on, we're staying at that cottage through the trees there."

In the cottage parlour, when Raffles turned up the wick of the oil-lamp, the spirit-tantalus and a plate of sandwiches awaited us on the table. Seeing the sandwiches, the tramp made no pretence of ceremony but started cramming them into his mouth with both hands. He had no cap. His bullet head was close-cropped, his stubbled face had a cadaverous pallor—and Raffles, as he poured three stiff whiskies, surmised in a pleasant tone, "Just out of quod, aren't you?"

The tramp's munching jaws froze.

"Don't let it embarrass you," Raffles said, smiling. "A spell in quod can happen to the best of us."

The tramp's jaws resumed munching. "All I done, guv'nor," he said, his accent Cockney, "was fetch me wife a love-tap or two, to shut 'er trap. Would you believe it, she 'ad me up for assault. I got three months in Wormwood Scrubbs. I got out last Wednesday, took to me 'eels when I saw 'er waitin' for me, an' tramped down from London to find this Brackenbourne place."

"Got a job to go to in the village?" Raffles asked.

The tramp's eyes, beadily appraising, flickered from one to the other of us as he munched. He took a swig of whiskey.

"I'm on probation, gents—ticket-o'-leave. Wherever I go, I'm supposed to report to the police. Them stinkers'll tell my wife where I'm at, an' she'll come yar-yar-yarin' after me an' 'ave me up again—for non-support. No, I don't want no job in this country. What I want is to get aht of it—on a ship from Southampton, over yonder."

"Getting a ship could be a bit awkward, couldn't it," Raffles said, "for a ticket-of-leave man?"

"Money could fix it, guv'nor—palm-oil, see? I ain't got no money, but I got information what's worth money. I'm lookin' for a family o' gentry 'ereabouts, which I don't know their name but

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it seems they lost a valuable a while back—an' if I can find the family, I got news for 'em."

I felt a sudden excitement. I looked at Raffles with a wild surmise. He sipped his drink, his eyes on the tramp.

"If the lost valuable is a Coronet," Raffles said, "I'm afraid I must warn you that your news will *not* be welcome to the family concerned. They never want to hear of it again."

The tramp's jaws clamped, in shock.

"So it *is* a Coronet," said Raffles. "I see. Well, now, as it happens, you're talking to friends of the family. We have their interests at heart. If your information's useful, *we* might help you get a ship out of Southampton—with a modest stake in your pocket."

"Stone the crows," the tramp said slowly, "me luck's changed!"

"We'll see," said Raffles. "What d'you know about that Coronet?"

"Guv'nor," the tramp blurted, "it's 'id in the inn at Brackenbourne!"

"Which inn?" said Raffles. "There are five of them."

"*Five* inns?" said the tramp, dismayed.

"So you don't know the name of the inn," Raffles said. "That's a pity. Well, now, I think you'd better tell us just what you *do* know."

The tramp told us that at Wormwood Scrubbs Prison he had been put in a cell already occupied by two men. One of them, a man called Garner, was serving six months. The other, a native of Limehouse, London's Chinatown, was called Sing and was serving three months.

A letter had been smuggled in to Garner, who had bragged to his cellmates that it was a letter which would make him rich when he got out, as it was from his brother, an Army officer's batman-groom stationed in India, and the letter told Garner where a Coronet worth thousands was hidden.

"From what Garner told me an' Sing," said the tramp, "it seems Garner's brother an' 'is officer was spendin' the night at an inn. Garner's brother 'ad to drive 'is officer an' two others in a 'ired pony-trap to a 'Unt Ball, see? Well, Garner's brother were waitin' around outside the mansion, like the rest o' the gentry's drivers, when 'e 'appens to notice a window open stealthy-like. 'E glimps summat green an' a kind o' sparklin' object throwed out into the laurel shrubbery.

"Well, the window shuts, an' Garner's brother goes an' moseys

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around in the shrubbery, an' lo an' be'hold, finds a Coronet in the damp leaves. So Garner's brother figgers it's stole, see, an' the thief plans to pick it up when the gentry's all gone 'ome. So Garner's brother pockets the object, thinkin' to wait on events, as you might say."

"One might indeed!" Raffles agreed.

"'Owsomever," said the tramp, "a Signals sergeant comes a-gallopin' up the drive wiv dispatches. Turns out it's immediate debarkation orders for the three officers, an Garner's brother 'as to drive 'em back post'aste to get their gear packed. Well, 'e knows 'is own kit'll get inspected, for embarkation, an' 'e can't think what the 'ell to do wiv the Coronet, so 'e 'ides it right there in the bleedin' inn."

"And writes from India," Raffles said, "asking his brother to collect it and dispose of it for him?"

"Right," said the tramp. "On shares, fifty-fifty. Garner reads out bits o' the letter to me an' Sing, but 'e don't mention the name o' the place, nor of the inn neither, an' when I asks 'im, innocent-like, know what 'e done, guv'nor? Puts the letter in 'is bloody great mouth an' eats it!"

"So how," Raffles said, "did you get on to the name of Brackenbourne?"

"Ar, I were one too many for 'im there," said the tramp, with satisfaction. "You gets allowed two books a week out o' the Scrubbs library—one what they calls Devotional type, one what they calls General Interest type. Well, Garner 'ad a book out, an' I seen 'im mark summat in it. So when 'im an' Sing's got their 'eads down asleep, I takes a dekko through the book. It's about this 'ere New Forest and some bloody Rufus Stone, very 'istorical, an' there's a map of the Forest, an' what Garner's marked wiv a circle round is a village—Brackenbourne."

"So you put two and two together," Raffles said. "And now it's added up to five. Five inns!" He puffed a cigarette alight over the lamp-chimney. "Is Garner still in the Scrubbs?"

"'E is, guv'nor. Sing got 'is release about two weeks ago. I got out Wednesday last. Garner—let's see, now—" The tramp looked suddenly startled. "Stone the crows, 'e's due out to-morrow!"

"*Is* he now," said Raffles. "H'm! Well, my friend, to-morrow I'll take you over to Southampton and see if I can find a venal ship's captain for you."

"God bless yer, guv'!" said the tramp. "It'll make all the dif-

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ɪrence, me bein' under a gentleman's wing!"

"Palm-oil speaks louder than breeding," Raffles said. "Thank ɔu, however. Now, for tonight, you can curl up in that basket-ɪair. I'll pin a note to the door, to warn our landlady there's a ɯest in the parlour. Make yourself at home and help yourself to ɪe whiskey . . . Come, Bunny, I have some instructions for you."

Outside the massive, grimy portals of Wormwood Scrubbs Pris-ɲ, in the summer sunshine of the following morning, a London ɔbby paced slowly to and fro. At a discreet distance along the nsavoury street, on which pallid faces looked down longingly ʻom barred windows above spiked walls, a hansom stood waiting.

In the hansom sat myself and Ivor Kern, the "fence" with whom affles and I occasionally did business. Before dawn that morn-ɪg, I had cycled to Lyndhurst Road, the little New Forest station ɪat served the Rufus Stone area, and caught the London & outh-Western Railway milk train up to the capital.

Raffles had taken the tramp to Southampton, while I myself, on ɐaching London, had collected Kern, a gloomy, young-old man ʻith an encyclopaedic knowledge of the London underworld, from is antique shop in the King's Road, Chelsea, and we had pro-ɐeded at once in this hansom to Wormwood Scrubbs.

Kern took out his watch. "It's gone ten o'clock, Manders. What ' this Garner fellow's already been released?"

"That'd be just too bad, Ivor," I said. "Raffles' instructions were ɪat I was to get you, then watch out for Garner, follow him, find ut where he lives. In the event of his catching a train down to ɪe Forest, I'm to wire Raffles at the Shergold cottage and go own on the same train as Garner."

As I was speaking, a clip-clop and jingle were growing louder ʻom behind our hansom. A closed carriage, too smart to be a ackney cab, went by—and I caught a fleeting glimpse of the river's face. It was a hard, impassive face, sallow under a bowler at. My breath caught in my throat. The man was Chinese.

"The Limehouse man!" I gripped Kern's arm. "Garner's recent ell-mate! Ivor, as sure as fate, that's Sing!"

A short distance ahead, and nearer the prison portals, the ɔur-wheeler pulled up. The driver, lean and wiry in a blue serge uit, twisted down sidewise from his seat on the box and seemed ɔ be speaking to someone in the carriage. Then he straightened nd, his back to us, the horse's reins in his hands, sat waiting.

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Kern said softly, "Manders, the Tongs hang out in Limehous and that chap looks to me like a Tong hatchetman!"

Even as he spoke, I saw a wicket door in the iron-studded po tals of the prison opening. A man with his belongings in brown-paper bundle under his arm stepped out. He looked a roug customer. As the wicket closed, the bobby said something to hin In reply, the released prisoner hawked insultingly and spat on th cobbles. Then he saw the four-wheeler. He stared at it for a m ment, then walked across to it.

"Well, chase me up a gum tree," he said, "if it ain't the u screwable Oriental! What's this, then? Figger it's 'ard on a blok not to be met, Sing? Come in yer employer's carriage to drive a old pal 'ome in style?"

Sing was nodding, all smiles.

"Why, Sing," said Garner, "such loyalty is what I likes to se Me palatial residence is 'alfway up the West India Docks Road a you shall 'ave cut off the fatted calf when we gets there. 'Om me lad, an' don't spare the 'osses!"

With a regal gesture, he opened the carriage door—and disap peared into the carriage with a jerk, as though suddenly assiste from within. The door thudded shut, Sing whipped his hors around, and as the carriage came clattering back past our han som, I thrust up the trap door in the roof and rapped at the cab bie, "Follow that four-wheeler!"

As we jingled off in pursuit, Kern said wryly, "Fatted calf, eh There'll be funeral baked meats for him if he doesn't come up fas with the information his captors want. Typical paltry crook– brainless—no sooner out of quod than the Tongs nab him! Man ders, I want nothing to do with Tong Highbinders. You can le me off at the corner."

"Raffles' instructions," I said, "were that we were to follo Garner."

The hunt led us, to my surprise, into the West End, teemin with horse traffic and the eerily gliding electric broughams Through Knightsbridge bowled the four-wheeler and into th Cromwell Road. Here, in this respectable residential area, th carriage turned off to the right. As we reached the corner, I spot ted that it was the entry to a *cul-de-sac*—and, in the nick of time I called to our cabbie to drive on. Just past the corner, I stoppe him, dismissed him with a sovereign for his trouble, and, wit Kern, walked back to the corner.

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Peering around it, I saw that to either side of the *cul-de-sac* were the sunny back gardens of houses, while across the dead end were green-painted double doors with the carriage standing facing them. Sing was unlocking the doors. As he opened them, I glimpsed the small yard of the kind of private coach-house which abounded in this district. Sing, afoot, led horse and carriage into the yard, then ran to shut the doors, and I heard bolts drop, rattling, into their sockets.

"Come on, Ivor!" I said, and we hurried along the *cul-de-sac,* opened the gate of the little garden just to the right of the doors, slipped in, crouched down behind a big fuschia bush in crimson bloom.

"What d'you plan to do?" Kern whispered.

"Watch those doors," I said.

Hooves clip-clopped to and fro along the nearby Cromwell Road. Bees bumbled around us in the flowers. It was hot. Interminable minutes passed. Suddenly I heard a rattle of bolts. The coach-yard doors opened wide. Two men in long white dustcoats and deerstalker caps appeared on the threshold. They were big men, solidly built. The slightly shorter but bulkier of them took off his cap to mop beads of sweat from a large, pink, hairless head. He beamed genially at his harder-featured companion.

"Sing's a good lad, Bart," said the pink man. "He keeps his ears open for us—even in quod. I'll raise his wages one of these days."

"If he hadn't been caught with doped beefbones to put those mastiffs to sleep, Flood," growled the hard-featured man, "we'd have made a good haul, back there a few months ago, and he wouldn't have landed in quod."

Kern's fingers were biting like screws into my shoulder. He breathed in my ear, "I know these men!"

The pink man put on his cap, took from his dust-coat pocket a leather cigar-case. "It was the rub o' the green, squire," he said. "You know your trouble? You brood over the past. It makes you surly. You want to be like me—keep your head down and your eye on the ball. Right now, we've got one tee'd up for us. We shook the name of the inn out of Garner, and just where the Coronet's hidden there. Have a cigar."

Kern breathed in my ear, "Five years ago I 'fenced' a haul of Queen Anne silver for the pink fellow."

I put a warning finger to my lips. The fragrance of Havana cigar smoke floated to us through the fuschias. From the court-

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yard came strange sounds, a kind of metallic cranking and gasping.

"No need to hurry ourselves, Bart," said the pink man. "We don't want to reach Brackenbourne village till about midnight, when all's quiet. We'll take our time on the road down, lunch at some good pub, dine at Winchester. There's a hotel there famous for its lobster mayonnaise and Rhineland Hocks. Garner can stay tied up in the coach-house here. If we collect the Coronet from where he claims it is, he gets five per cent of the proceeds."

"Two-and-a-half," growled the surly man.

"We'll call it three," and his companion, "to make up for the way you knocked him about when we had him in the carriage. You don't realise your own strength at times, squire. Anyway, Hollings can stand guard over him here till we get back tomorrow. We've only got Hollings half trained as our butler yet, but he's got a gun and knows how to use it. And so do we." The pink man beamed genially, his greenish eyes glinting. "Eh, squire?"

A sudden clatter and roar broke out in the coach-yard. I heard a grinding sound. A vehicle nosed out through the coach-yard doorway. It was an automobile, one of the first I had seen at such close quarters. It had high mudguards over its metal-studded anti-flint tyres. Its great carbide headlamps glittered in the sunshine. Sing, who had changed his coachman's bowler hat for a chauffeur's peaked cap, sat behind the steering-wheel. He tugged at the brake-lever on the step of the tonneau. The automobile halted, throbbing with horsepower.

Sing donned goggles as his employers pulled shut and locked the coach-yard doors. The two bulky scoundrels in the deerstalker caps and linen dust-coats also donned goggles. The genial man climbed up to the front seat beside Sing. The surly man mounted into the rear of the four-seater tonneau.

Sing released the brake and, with a surge of power, the automobile rolled off along the *cul-de-sac,* turned to the right into the Cromwell Road. The horse of a passing hansom shied violently, rearing. The sound of the automobile receded into the distance, bound for the New Forest, as Kern and I stepped out from our hiding-place into an acrid vapour that had dowsed the fragrance of the motorists' Havanas.

"Ivor," I said, more shaken than I cared to show. "I'll wire Raffles, at the Shergold cottage, a full account of the situation, in the

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private code we use. Then I'll take the first train I can get down to the Forest. You say you know these men?"

Kern nodded grimly. "Chauffeur, butler, automobile, Hock, and lobsters! Man alive, the pink fellow's gone up in the world! Five years ago, he was a half-starved crook known as 'Smiler' Bunn. He's put on flesh. His ugly-tempered partner was a fradulent company promoter—used to call himself Lord Fortworth, Chairman, on his prospectuses. He had to disappear for a while." Kern drew in his breath. "My God, Smiler Bunn and ex-Lord Fortworth! Easy Street Experts, that Combine! Manders, tell Raffles to watch his step!"

"So you've had a disturbing day, Bunny," Raffles greeted me, as I stepped off the train at Lyndhurst Road halt that night.

Clean-cut, hatless, his tweeds impeccable, a pearl in his cravat, he was awaiting me under the dim oil-lamps of the little station in the Rufus Stone area of the Forest.

"The earliest train I could get out of London," I said, "was the six-thirty to Southampton, and I had a maddeningly long wait there for the local to Lyndhurst Road."

"It's now about eleven-thirty," Raffles said. "Come on! Your borrowed bike's where you left it here with the Stationmaster this morning, and I came on the other bike to meet you."

"What about the tramp?" I asked, as we pedalled off on our lampless bikes along the lane into the woodlands, darkly brooding under a quarter moon.

"No great problem," said Raffles. "I got him on to a ship bound for the River Plate. Your long telegram was waiting for me when I got back to the Shergold cottage."

"Where are we headed for now?"

"Brackenbourne, of course. Where else?"

"Raffles, there are three of them in this motorist gang, and they're armed—as we never are. They know the name of the inn. They know where the Coronet's hidden there. They'll get it. I ask you, what earthly chance have we got of wresting it from them?"

"There's a principle, Bunny, which I've found to be sound in practice."

"What principle?"

"Just to take things as they come," said Raffles. "By the way, did you get a newspaper to read on the train?"

"I had other things on my mind."

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"You missed something, then—an announcement, Bunny—the engagement of Philippa Morton to Major Hector Barron."

"Then it was probably he," I exclaimed, "who stole the Coronet!"

"No, Bunny. He's a Lancer."

"What difference does that make?"

"Garner's brother, the bat-man-groom," Raffles said, "glimpsed 'something green' at the moment a sparkling object was thrown from a window of The Moot Hall. What he glimpsed, almost certainly, was the arm of the thrower. But, Bunny, a Lancer's mess-jacket, like his uniform, is scarlet. The only man wearing green at the Hunt Ball was Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross—in the bottle-green mess-jacket, with black buttons, of the Rifle Brigade."

"Good God, Raffles!"

"The D'Arzac Coronet's reputed to be unlucky. For the Marquis, Bunny, it has lived up to its reputation. His chivalrous theft availed him nothing. The Lancer got the lady."

"Then be warned! Raffles, be warned! The Coronet can prove as luckless for us as for the Marquis!"

He only smiled. From the dark coverts a roosting cock-pheasant sounded its hoarse alarm note. We emerged from the woods. Moonlight illumined faintly the wide, rolling heaths. Below us, down the slope of the grit road, lay Brackenbourne. Not a light was visible.

"Forest folk retire early, Bunny. The village has been dark since just after ten tonight."

Freewheeling, silent as shadows, we sped down the slope. Nocturnal coots piped and splashed restlessly in a pond to the right. We rode into the village. The thatched dwellings to either side of the road that curved like a strung bow through the village were silent and dark. We came to the church, on its small knoll in the village centre. To the left of the church lay the village green, where dark blots marked recumbent cows chewing their cuds.

"The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep," said Raffles, as he opened the gate to the churchyard with its mossed and leaning tombstones. "Put your bike against the inside of the wall, Bunny. From here, among the yews, we can see each way along the curve of the village street. Let's have a smoke."

He gave me a cigarette, held a match-flame in cupped hands to it. His hands were steady. Not so were mine. He lighted his own

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cigarette, held the match-flame to a lichened tomb-slab. On the slab lay a short ladder.

"Better not sit on our friend Habbakuk's ancestors," he said. "'Here lie Ebenezer Hooper, died 1803, Huntsman to King Rufus's Foxhounds, and His Spouse, Abigail, died—'"

"Look!" I said.

The match went out. Far off beyond the green, a light moved. Surmounting a swell, the lilac glare of carbide headlamps lanced out over the heaths. In the steeple above our heads, the clock began mellowly to chime.

"Punctual, aren't they?" said Raffles. "Well, well! The amazing Mr. Bunn and Company."

The midnight chimes, so close, drowned for us the throb of the approaching automobile. Its headlamp-glare scythed round on to the road dipping down to the village—and vanished. And the last chime struck. Now all was still.

"Pulled up on the slope," Raffles murmured. "Coming into the village afoot, so as to make no noise."

I strained my eyes. Clouds, slow drifting, obscured the horned moon. A pony whickered, far off, and was answered from nearby. Unshod hooves came tapping briskly along the village street. Shadowy, three ponies trotted past the churchyard gate and vanished on to the green.

Moonlight began to return, spectral. Cloud-shadows stole over the low, thatched roofs. We trod out our cigarettes. My heart pumped, heavy. Far along the sleeping street, a pencil of light rayed upward, and was instantly gone.

"D'you see them?" I whispered.

"Just," said Raffles. "There's their light again."

It showed for an instant, pointing up, then was gone. The moonlight faintly strengthened. Vaguely, then, I discerned them—two bulky figures pale in dust-coats, and a dark-garbed figure lithely bending.

"The chauffeur," I whispered. "Can you make out what he's doing?"

"Seems to be unfolding something, Bunny. Yes, it's an extendable ladder. He's propping it against the inn there—at the angle of the thatched eaves. He's going up the ladder."

"To enter through one of those little casement windows under the eaves, Raffles—while his employers stand guard—goggled men with guns!"

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"He's not entering the inn, Bunny. No, I see what he's doing. Come on!"

Mystified, I saw Raffles pick up the short ladder which lay on the Hooper tomb. Carrying the ladder in one hand, wheeling his bicycle with the other, he moved away between the yews. I followed, wheeling my bike. We emerged from the churchyard by another gate, on the side away from the Bunn marauders. The bend in the village street hid them from our view. We mounted, riding away from them. About a couple of hundred yards on, Raffles dismounted. So did I.

"Hold my bike, Bunny!"

While I held the bikes, Raffles propped the ladder against the eave-angle of the inn here. Clouds obscured the moon as he mounted the ladder. He seemed to be thrusting something up into the thatch. A sound of snoring reached me from a small upper window, latched open on this warm night. Something dropped, soundless, from the eaves. Peering down, I made out a last year's bird's nest. Raffles came down the ladder.

"Now, Bunny, we'll detour round over the green and regain the road about half-way up the slope."

It was bumpy pedalling, Raffles carrying the ladder, lamplighter style, on his shoulder, but we reached the road at a point about fifty yards above the pond where the restless coots piped and splashed. As we pedalled on up the slope, we came upon the Bunn Combine's automobile, drawn up with its lights off at the roadside. Raffles dismounted, dropping the ladder.

He climbed on to the step of the automobile, gripped the steering-wheel, turned the front wheels to a slight angle. He stepped down, released the brake-lever. The automobile began to move slowly down the slope.

"Automobiles," he said, as he picked up the ladder, "are a menace to every pony wandering free in the Forest."

The automobile, gathering speed, jolting, was travelling at a shallow angle aslant across the road. We remounted, pedalled on up the slope. All of a sudden, from behind us, sounded a considerable splash, followed by scandalized ejaculations from the coots.

We gained the woodland at the head of the slope and, within ten minutes, quietly entered the parlour of the Shergold cottage.

Raffles turned up the lampwick. The spirit-tantalus and a plate of sandwiches awaited us on the table. The casement window was wide-open to the garden.

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Still breathing hard from the ride, I burst out, "What was the idea of planting something in the thatch of an inn that the Bunn gang has no reason to go to?"

He gave me a quick look of surprise.

"Why, Bunny," he said, "at about half-past ten tonight, when Brackenbourne had bedded down, I cycled quietly through the village with Mr. Shergold's ladder on my shoulder. As Habbakuk Hooper remarked, the inn signs he painted are of modest and uniform size. I found it quite easy to lift them from their hooks and deal the pack afresh."

"Deal it *afresh,* Raffles?"

"No problem at all, Bunny. So, naturally, as the motorist gang was judging by the inn signs, whichever inn they went to was bound to be the wrong one. At the same time, the one they went to told me which was the right one. Then I only had to watch what they did at the wrong one—and I knew what to do myself at the right one.

"I left Mr. Shergold's ladder in the churchyard, in case it might come in useful, then cycled over to meet you at Lyndhurst Road station."

He puffed a cigarette alight over the lamp-chimney.

"Planting? Why, no, old boy. Emulating the action of the Smiler Bunn gang's chauffeur at the wrong inn, I was groping in the thatched eaves of the right inn for something already planted—by Garner's batman-groom brother on the night of the Hunt Ball, as he hastily packed his own and his officer's kit in the inn bedroom just to the left of the eave-angle. Plant, Bunny? You and I don't plant. We reap."

He took from his pocket a red bandanna handkerchief, unfolded it on the table. The gems of the luckless heirloom of the Darsey Mortons dazzled my eyes.

"Oh, dear God!" I could barely breathe.

The decanter glugged as Raffles poured whiskey. "An exhilarating hunt, Bunny—from stirrup-cup to nightcap. Of course, this is a very ancient Forest. When it's found that all five inns have changed names in the night, and furthermore a mechanical menace to the ponies and deer is discovered strangely bogged in the coots' pond, no doubt there'll be loose talk among rustics about the Forest spirits being at work on a night when a horned moon rose over the Rufus Stone." He chuckled. "But you and I are Londoners, Bunny. Superstitions, legends of misfortune, have no

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meaning for *us*. So why are you looking at the D'Arzac Coronet with such a peculiar expression?"

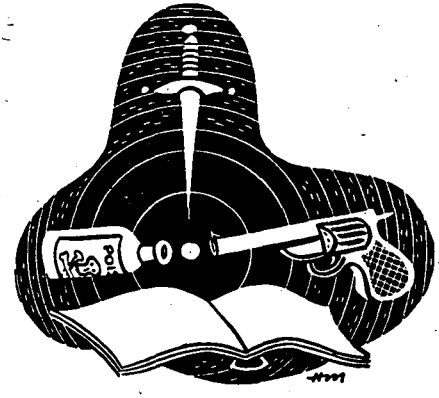
I was about to answer when, silently, ghost-pale out of the night, an apparition materialized at the open window. The words froze in my throat.

For an instant, from the sill, a great white owl with a field-mouse struggling limply in its beak stared in at us with huge eyes glowing green, enigmatic and blind in the lamplight.

Then the wide wings spread. The owl floated away, soundless.

Neither Raffles nor I moved.

A breeze rustled, stealthy, through the glades of the Forest.



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Ellery Queen

The President Regrets

Shortly after Ellery became the sixth member of The Puzzle Club, the President of the United States was proposed for membership . . .

Detective: ELLERY QUEEN

The Puzzle Club is a congeries of very important people drawn together by unimportant purpose but common passion—to wit, to mystify one another. Their pleasure, in short, is puzzles.

Application is by invitation only, and membership must be won, the applicant having to submit to the Ordeal by Puzzle. If he survives the test, it earns him automatic admission.

Shortly after Ellery became The Puzzle Club's sixth regular member, it was proposed and unanimously voted to invite the President of the United States to apply for membership.

This was no frivolous motion; the members took their puzzles seriously, and the President was known to be a devotee of mysteries in all lawful forms. Besides, the Club's founder and First Member, multimillionaire oil man Syres, had been buddy-buddy with the occupant of the White House since their youthful days as riggers in the Texas oilfields.

The invitation went to Washington, and rather to Ellery's surprise the President promptly accepted the challenge. In deference to affairs of state, he was urged to designate his own date, which he did; but when Ellery arrived at Syres's Park Avenue penthouse on the appointed evening to find the membership assembled, he was greeted with gloomy news. The President regretted that he could not make it after all. A Secret Service man, just departed, had brought the message that a crisis in Asia had caused a last-minute cancellation of the President's flight to New York.

"What shall we do now?" asked Darnell, the famous criminal lawyer.

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"There's no point in wasting the puzzle we've prepared for the President," said Dr. Vreeland, the well-known psychiatrist. "Let's save it for whenever he can get here."

"It's too bad Dr. Arkavy is still attending that symposium in Moscow," said wispy little Emmy Wandermere, the poet. Dr. Arkavy was the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist. "He has such a fertile mind, he can always come up with something on the spur of the moment."

"Maybe our newest member can help us out," said their Texan host. "What do you say, Queen? You must have a hundred problems at your fingers' ends, from your long experience as a writer and a detective."

"Let me think." Ellery cogitated. Then he chuckled. "All right. Give me a few minutes to work out the details . . ." It took him far less. "I'm ready. I suggest we engage in some collective improvisation, to begin with. Since this is going to be a murder mystery, we will obviously require a victim. Any suggestions?"

"A woman, of course," the lady poet said at once.

"Reeking of glamor," said the psychiatrist.

"That," said the criminal lawyer, "would seem to call for a Hollywood movie star."

"Good enough," Ellery said. "And a glamour girl of the screen calls for a glamorous name. Let's call her . . .oh, Valetta Van Buren. Agreed?"

"Valetta Van Buren." Miss Wandermere considered. "Yes. She personifies sex in her roles—a smoky witch with enormous cold, full-moon eyes. Does that follow, Mr. Queen?"

"Perfectly. Well, Valetta is in New York to attend the première of her latest picture and to do the circuit of TV appearances in promotion of it," Ellery went on. "But this hasn't proved an ordinary publicity tour. In fact, Valetta has had a frightening experience. It so shook her up that she wrote me an agitated letter about it which, by the magic of coincidence, I received just this morning."

"In which," Dr. Vreeland pressed, "she said—"

"That during this New York visit she permitted herself to be squired about town by four men—"

"Who are all, naturally, in love with her?" asked the lady poet.

"You guessed it, Miss Wandermere. She identified the four in her letter. One is that notorious man-about-town and playboy, John Thrushbottom Taylor the Third—and if you haven't heard of

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Mr. Taylor, it's because I just made him up. The second is that wolf—in both senses—of Wall Street, named . . . well, let's call him A. Palmer Harrison. The third, of course, is the latest rage among society portrait painters, Leonardo Price. And the last of the quartet is—let's see—Biff Wilson, the professional football player."

"A likely story," grinned Oil Man Syres.

"Now." Ellery made a professional bridge of his fingers. "Having named the four men for me, Valetta went on to say that yesterday all four proposed marriage to her—each of them, on the same day. Unhappily, our ineffable Valetta felt nothing for any of them—nothing permanent, at any rate. She rejected all four impartially. It was a busy day for Miss Van Buren, and she would have enjoyed it except for one thing."

"One of them," said the criminal lawyer, "turned ugly."

"Exactly, Darnell. Valetta wrote me that three of them took their turndowns with approximate grace. But the fourth flew into a homicidal rage and threatened to kill her. She was terrified that he would try to carry out his threat and asked me to get in touch with her at once. She felt reluctant to go to the police, she wrote, because of the bad publicity it would bring her."

"What happened then?" asked Syres.

"I phoned, of course," Ellery replied, "as soon as I finished reading her letter. Would you believe it? I was too late. She was murdered last night, a short time after she must have mailed the letter. So the screen has lost its sexiest pot, and millions of red-blooded Americans at this very moment are mourning the sheer waste of it all."

"How," asked Darnell, "was the foul deed done?"

"I could tell you," Ellery said, "that she was done in by a Tasmanian yoyo, but I won't be unfair—the nature of the weapon is irrelevant. However, I will say this, to avoid complications: Valetta *was* murdered by the suitor who threatened her life."

"And is that all?" asked the tycoon.

"No, I've saved the kicker for last, Mr. Syres. Valetta's letter gave me one clue. In writing about the four men, she said that she'd noticed *she had something in common with three of the four,* and that the fourth was the one who had threatened her."

"Oh," said Dr. Vreeland. "Then all we have to establish is the nature of the common denominator. The three sharing it with Valetta would be innocent. By elimination, therefore, the one left over has to be the guilty man."

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Ellery nodded. "And now—if my initiation at the last meeting was a criterion—the floor is open. Any questions?"

"I take it," the lady poet murmured, "that we may disregard the obvious possibilities of connection—that Valetta and three of the men were of the same age, or had the same color hair, or the same religious affiliation, or came from the same town or state, or attended the same college, or were investors or board members in the same corporation—that sort of thing?"

Ellery laughed. "Yes, you may disregard those."

"Social position?" the multimillionaire ventured. "Three of the men you described—Playboy John Something Taylor, Wall Street man A. Palmer Harrison, Portrait Painter Price—did they all come from high society? That probably wouldn't be true of the pro football player, What's-His-Name."

"It just happened," Ellery mourned, "that Portrait Painter Price was born in a Greenwich Village pad. And Valetta, of course, hailed from the slums of Chicago."

They pondered.

"Had three of the four men ever served with Valetta," asked Darnell suddenly, "on the same jury?"

"No."

"On a TV panel show?" asked the poet quickly.

"No, Miss Wandermere."

"Don't tell me," said Dr. Vreeland, smiling, "that Valetta Van Buren and three of her suitors at one juncture in their lives shared the same psychiatrist's couch?"

"That's a good solution, Doctor. But it's not the solution I have in mind."

"Politics," the oil man said. "Valetta and three of the suitors are registered in the same party."

"My information, Mr. Syres," said Ellery, "is that Valetta was an incorrigible Democrat, the playboy and the Wall Street men are conservative Republicans, and Price and Biff Wilson never voted in their lives."

Miss Wandermere suddenly said, "It isn't anything like that. Am I right, Mr. Queen, in assuming that all the relevant facts were given to us in the body of your story?"

"I wondered when someone was going to ask that." Ellery chuckled. "That's exactly so, Miss Wandermere. There's really no need to ask questions at all."

"Then I for one need more time," said the tycoon. "What about

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he rest of you?" At their abstracted nods their host rose. "Then et's make an exception tonight and eat Charlot's exquisite dinner efore we crack Queen's puzzle."

Miss Wandermere's shocking blue eyes sparkled with enightenment during Charlot's *moussaline de saumon.* Darnell's nustache-sized brows lifted with elation over the *suprêmes de olaille aux huîtres.* Dr. Vreeland uttered his self-congratulatory xclamation at the serving of the *selle de veau à l'Orientale.* And heir host, Syres, achieved sweet victory over his *charlotte Chanilly.* But no one uttered a word until they were seated about the rawing room again over espresso and brandy.

"I detect from this and that," Ellery said, "that none of you encountered any real difficulty with my little puzzle."

"It's too bad the President had to miss this," Syres roared. "It vas made to order, Queen, for his type of mind! Are you all quite eady?"

There was a universal nod.

"In that case," Ellery said, with resignation, "which of Valetta's our swains murdered her?"

CHALLENGE TO THE READER
Can you qualify for membership in
The Puzzle Club?

"Females first, always," said Dr. Vreeland with a gallant nod to Miss Wandermere.

"The key to the answer," said the lady poet promptly, "consists n the fact, Mr. Queen, that you really told us just one thing bout Valetta *and* her four suitors. It follows that whatever she nd three of the four men had in common must relate to that hing."

"A logic I can't dispute," murmured Ellery. "And that thing vas?"

Darnell grinned. "What the anticipation of the President's visit ere tonight suggested to you when we asked for an impromptu uzzle. Their names."

"You named the movie star Valetta Van Buren," said Syres. *Van Buren—the name of a President of the United States."*

"Then Playboy John Thrushbottom Taylor the Third," said the sychiatrist. "You buried that one, Queen! But of course Taylor is

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the name of a President of the United States, too—Zachary Taylor."

"And the Wall Street man, A. Palmer Harrison," the lawyer said. "Harrison—William Henry. Also Benjamin."

"And professional football player Biff Wilson." Miss Wandermere twinkled. "That 'Biff' was masterly, Mr. Queen. But—of course, Wilson, for Woodrow Wilson."

"And that leaves one character whose name," said the oil man, "bears no cross-reference to a President's name—Leonardo Price. So Price, the portrait painter, murdered Valetta. You almost had me fooled, Queen. Taylor, Van Buren, Harrison! That was tricky, picking the more obscure Presidents."

"You could hardly expect me to name one of my characters Eisenhower," Ellery grinned. "Which reminds me." He raised his brandy snifter. "Here's to our absent President—and may he turn out to be the next member of The Puzzle Club!"

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Ruth Rendell

The Long Corridor of Time

Geoffrey Gilmour was twice as old as Marion Craig when they became engaged, and after their marriage he seemed to feel older and older . . .

A subtle, tantalizing story whose mood grows more somber, more uneasy, more frightening, with each page . . .

On the evening of their first day, when they had hung their pictures and unpacked their wedding presents—tasks they hadn't cared to entrust to her mother or to the moving men—they went for a walk in the square. They walked along the pavement in the September twilight, admiring the pale gleaming facades of the terraces which, now divided into flats, had once been the London residences of the very rich. Then, when they had completed their little tour and had examined all four sides of the square, Marion took his hand and led him toward the wilderness of trees and shrubs which formed its center.

It was a gloomy place where only the tall trees—a plane, a walnut, and a catalpa—seemed to flourish. A few attenuated rosebushes struggled for life in the shadowy corners, their wan flowers blighted with mildew. Marion put her hand on the gate in the iron railings.

"It's locked," she said.

"Of course it is, darling. It's a private garden for the tenants only. The head porter gave me our key just now."

"Do let's go in and explore it."

"If you like, but there doesn't seem much to explore."

She hesitated, holding the key he had handed her, looking through the railings at the small patchy lawn, the stone table, and the wooden seat. "No," she said. "Tomorrow will do. I *am* rather tired."

He was touched, knowing how anxious she always was to please him. "It's hardly the sort of garden you've been used to, is it?"

She smiled but said nothing.

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"Do you know, darling, I feel very guilty. I've taken you away from the country, from all your country things—your horses, the dogs—everything. And all I've given you is this."

"You didn't *take* me, Geoffrey. I came of my own free will."

"Hmm. I wonder how much free will we really have. If you hadn't met me, you'd be at the university now—you'd have your own friends, young people. I'm twice your age."

"Oh, no," she said seriously as they walked back to the terrace where their flat was. "I'll be eighteen next week. You were twice my age when we got engaged and I was seventeen and five months. Exactly twice. I worked it out to the day.

He smiled. The head porter came out, holding the door open for them. "Good night, madam. Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Geoffrey. So she had worked it out to the day. The earnest accuracy of this, a sort of futile playfulness, seemed to him entirely characteristic of the childhood she hadn't quite left behind. Only five or six years ago perhaps she had been writing, with comparable precision, inside exercise books: *Marion Craig, The Mill House, Sapley, Sussex, England, Europe, The World, The Universe.* And now she was his wife.

"He called me madam," she said as they went up in the elevator. "No one ever did that before." With his arm round her and her head on his shoulder she said, "You'll never be twice my age again, darling. That isn't mathematically possible."

"I know that, my love. You've no idea," he said, laughing, "what a tremendous comfort that is."

It wasn't true, of course, that he had given her nothing but a dusty scrap of London shrubbery to compensate for the loss of The Mill House. He asked himself which of her friends, those schoolgirls who had been her bridesmaids, could expect even in five years' time a husband who was a partner in a firm of stockbrokers, a five-room flat in nearly the smartest part of London, a car of her own parked in the square next to her husband's Jaguar, and a painting for her drawing-room wall that was almost certainly a Sisley.

And he wouldn't stand in her way, he thought as he looked in his bedroom glass before leaving for work, scrutinizing his dark head for those first silver hairs. She could still ride, still have parties for people her own age. And he would give her everything she wanted.

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He glanced down at the fair head on the pillow. She was still asleep and on her skin lay the delicate bloom of childhood, a patina that is lighter and more evanescent than dew and is gone by twenty. He kissed her tenderly on the side of her folded lips.

"It bothers me a bit," he said to Philip Sarson who came out as he was unlocking his car. "What is Marion going to do with herself all day? We don't know anyone here but you."

"Oh, go shopping, go to the cinema," said Philip airily. "When I suggested you take the flat I thought how handy the West End would be. Besides, married women soon find their hands full."

"If you mean kids, we don't mean to have any for years yet. She's so *young*. God, you do talk like a Victorian sometimes."

"Well, it's my period. I'm steeped in it."

Geoffrey got into his car. "How's the new book coming?"

"Gone off to my publisher. Come round tonight and I'll read you some bits?"

"No, you come to see us," said Geoffrey, trying to sound enthusiastic. A jolly evening for Marion, he thought, a merry end to the day for an eighteen-year-old—coffee and brandy with a tired stockbroker of 35 and an historian of 45. He would ask her first thing he got back what she thought about it and if there were the least hesitancy in her manner, he would phone Philip and put him off.

"But I'd like to see him," she said. "I love hearing about Victorian London. Stop worrying about me."

"I expect I shall when we've settled in. What did you do today?"

"I went to Harrods and matched the stuff for the dining-room curtains and I arranged for my driving lessons. Oh, and I explored the garden."

"The garden? Oh, that bit of jungle in the middle of the square."

"Don't be so disparaging. It's a dear little garden. There are some lovely old trees and one of the porters told me they actually get squirrels in there. It's been such a hot day and it was so quiet and peaceful sitting on the seat in the shade."

"Quiet and peaceful!" he said.

She linked her arm through his and touched his cheek with one gentle finger. "I don't want to be a gadabout all the time, Geoffrey, and I've never been very wild. Don't you like me the way I am?"

He put his arms round her, emotion almost choking him. "I love

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everything about you. I must be the luckiest man in London."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Philip when, two hours later, Marion resumed her praises of the garden. "It *is* peaceful. I used to sit out there a lot last summer, working on my book, *Great-Grandfather's London*. I've passed many a happy hour in that garden."

"Yes, but you're practically a great-grandfather yourself," Geoffrey retorted. "I want Marion to go out with her contemporaries."

"Very few of her contemporaries can afford to live in Palomede Square, Geoff. But I'm glad you like it, Marion. I'm thinking of writing a book about the square itself. I've unearthed some fascinating stories and a lot of famous people have lived here." Philip named a poet, an explorer, and a statesman. "These houses were built in 1840 and I think that a hundred and thirty years of comings and goings ought to make a good read."

"I'd like to hear some of those stories one day," said Marion. In her long black skirt she looked like a schoolgirl dressed up for charades. She must get out and buy clothes, Geoffrey thought, spend a lot of money. He could afford it.

Philip had begun to read from his manuscript and during the pauses, while Marion asked questions, Geoffrey thought—perhaps because they had all been mentally transported back more than 100 years—of those Victorian dresses which were once more so fashionable for the very young. He imagined Marion in one of them, a ruched and flounced gown with a high, boned collar and long puff sleeves. In his mind's eye he saw her as a reincarnation of a Nineteenth Century ingenue crossing the square, her blonde hair combed high, walking with delicate tread toward the garden.

Smiling at Philip, nodding to show he was still listening, he got up to draw the curtains. But before he pulled the cords, he looked out beyond the balcony to the empty square below with its lemony spots of lamplight and its neglected, leafy, umbrageous center. Between the canopy of the ilex and the dusty yellow-spotted laurel he made out the shape of the stone table and, beside it, the seat that looked as if it had never been occupied.

The corners of the garden were now deep caverns of shadow and nothing moved but a single leaf which, blown prematurely from the plane tree, scuttered across the sour green turf like some distracted insect. He pulled the curtain cords sharply, wondering why he suddenly felt, in the company of his loved wife and his old friend, so ill at ease.

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"How was your driving lesson, darling?"

"It was nice," she said, smiling up at him with a kind of gleeful pride. "He said I was very good. When I came back I sat in the garden learning the Highway Code."

"Why not sit on the balcony? If I'd been at home today I'd have sunbathed all afternoon on that balcony."

She said naively, "I do wish you could be home all day," and then, as if feeling her way with caution, "I like the garden best."

"But you don't get any light there at all. It must be the gloomiest hole in London. As far as I can see, no one else uses it."

"I'll sit on the balcony if you want me to, Geoffrey. I won't go in the garden if it upsets you."

"*Upsets* me? What an extraordinary word to use! Of course it doesn't *upset* me. But the summer's nearly over and you might as well make the best of what's left."

While they had been speaking, standing by the windows which were open onto the balcony, she had been holding his arm. But he felt its warm pressure relax and when he looked down at her he saw that her face now had a vague and distant look, a look that was both remote and secretive, and her gaze had traveled beyond the balcony rail to the motionless treetops below.

For the first time since their wedding he felt rejected, left out of her thoughts. He took her face in his hand and kissed her lips.

"You look so beautiful in that dress—sprigged muslin, isn't it?—like a Jane Austen girl going to her first ball. You didn't wear that for your driving lesson?"

"No, I changed when I came in. I wanted to put it on before I went into the garden. Wasn't that funny? I just had this feeling I ought to wear it for the garden."

"I hoped," he said, "you were wearing it for me."

"Oh, darling," she said, and now he felt that she was with him once more, "I can understand it upsets you when I go into the garden. I *quite* understand. I know it could affect some people like that. Isn't it strange that I know? But I won't go there again."

He didn't know what she meant or why his simple distaste for the place—a reasonable dislike that was apparently shared by the other tenants—should call for understanding. But he loved her too much to bother with it, and the vague unease he felt passed when she told him she had telephoned one of her bridesmaid friends and been invited to a gathering of young people. It gratified him that she was beginning to make a life of her own, planning to at-

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tend with this friend a course of classes. He took her out to dinner, proud of her flounced lilac muslin, exultant at the admiring glances she drew.

But he awoke in the night to strange terrors which he couldn't at first define. She lay with one arm about his shoulders but he shook it off almost roughly and went quickly to get a glass of water as if, distressingly, mystifyingly, he must get away from her for a moment at all costs.

Sitting in the half-dark drawing room, he tried to analyze this night fear and came up with one short sentence: I am jealous. Never in his life had he been jealous before and the notion of jealousy had never touched their marriage. But now in the night, without cause, as the result of some forgotten dream perhaps, he was jealous. She was going to a party of young people, to classes with young people. Why had he never before considered that some of those contemporaries whom he encouraged her to associate with would necessarily be young men? And how could he, though rich, successful, though still young in a way, compete with a youth of twenty?

A sudden impulse came to him to draw back the curtains and look down into the garden, but he checked it and went back to bed. As he felt her, warm and loving beside him, his fears went and he slept.

"That's a very young chap teaching Marion to drive," said Philip, who worked at home all day, gossiped with the porters, and knew everything that went on. "He doesn't look any older than she."

"Really? She didn't say."

"Why should she? He won't seem young to her."

Geoffrey went up the steps. He had forgotten his key.

"Is my wife in, Jim?" he said to the head porter. "If not, you'll have to open up for me."

"Mrs. Gilmour is in the garden, sir."

"In the *garden?*"

"Yes, sir. Madam's spent every day this week in the garden. The gardener's no end pleased about it, I can tell you. He said to me only this morning, 'The young lady'—no disrespect, sir, but he called her the young lady—'really appreciates my garden, more than some others I could name.' "

"I don't get it," said Geoffrey as he and Philip went down into

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the square. "I really don't. She promised me she wouldn't go there again. I honestly do think she might keep the first promise she's made to me. It's a bit bloody much."

Philip looked curiously at him. "Promised you she wouldn't go into the garden? Why shouldn't she?"

"Because I told her not to, that's why."

"My dear old Geoff, don't get so angry. What's come over you? I've never known you to get into such a state over a trifle."

Through clenched teeth Geoffrey said, "I am not accustomed to being disobeyed," but even as he spoke, as the alien words were ground out and Philip stood still, thunderstruck, he felt the anger that had overcome him without any apparent will of his own seep away, and he laughed rather awkwardly. "God, what a stupid thing to say! Marion!" he called. "I'm home."

She had been sitting on the seat, a book on the table in front of her. But she hadn't been reading it, for although it was open, the pages were fast becoming covered with fallen leaves. She turned a bemused face toward him, blank, almost hypnotized; but suddenly she seemed to regain consciousness. She picked up her book, scattered the leaves, and ran toward the gate.

"I shouldn't have gone into the garden," she said. "I didn't mean to but it looked so lovely and I couldn't resist. Wasn't it funny that I couldn't resist?"

He had meant to be gentle and loving, to tell her she was always free to do as she pleased. The idea that he might ever become paternalistic, let alone autocratic, horrified him. But how could she talk of being unable to resist as if there were something tempting about that drab autumnal place?

"I really don't follow you," he said. "It's a mystery to me." If tempered with a laugh, if accompanied by a squeeze of her hand, his words would have been harmless. But he heard them ring coldly and—worse—he felt glad his reproof had gone home, satisfied that she looked hurt and a little cowed.

She sighed, giving the garden a backward glance in which there was something of yearning, something—was he imagining it?—of deceit. He took her arm firmly, trying to think of something that would clear the cloud from her face, but all that came out was a rather sharp, "Don't let's hang about here. We're due at my cousin's in an hour."

She nodded compliantly. Instead of feeling remorse, he was irritated by the very quality that had captivated him, her childlike

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naïveté. A deep and sullen depression enclosed him, and while they were at his cousin's party he spoke roughly to her once or twice, annoyed because she sat silent and then, illogically, even more out of temper when she was stirred into a faint animation by the attentions of a boy her own age.

From that evening onward he found himself beginning to look for faults in her. Had she always been so vague, so dreamy? Had that idleness, that forgetfulness, always been there? She had ceased to speak of the garden. All those jaded leaves had fallen. The thready plane twigs hung bare, the evergreens had dulled to blackness, and often in the mornings the stone table, the seat, and the circle of grass were rimed with frost. The nights drew in at four o'clock and it was far too cold to sit in the open air.

Yet when he phoned his home from his office, as he had increasingly begun to do in the afternoons, he seldom received a reply. Nothing had come of that plan to go to classes and she said she never saw her friend. Where, then, was she when he phoned?

She couldn't be having daily driving lessons, each one lasting for hours. He might have asked her but he didn't. He brooded instead on her absences and his suppressed resentment burst into flames when there was no dinner prepared for their guests.

"They'll be here in three-quarters of an hour!" He had never shouted at her before and she put up her hand to her lips, shrinking away from him.

"Geoffrey, I don't know what happened to me but I forgot. Please forgive me. Can't we take them out?"

"People will begin to think I've married some sort of crazy child. What about last week when you 'forgot' that reception, when you 'forgot' to write and thank my cousin after we'd dined there?"

She had begun to cry. "All right," he said harshly, "we'll take them to a restaurant. Haven't much choice, have we? For God's sake, get out of that bloody dress!"

She was again wearing the lilac muslin. Evening after evening when he got home he found her in it—the dress he had adored but which was now worn and crumpled, with a food spot at the waist.

He poured himself a stiff drink. He was shaking with anger. The arguments in her favor he had put forward when she forgot the reception—that there had been a dozen gatherings which she hadn't forgotten but had graced—now seemed invalid in the face of this neglect.

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But when she came back into the room his rage went. She wore a dress he hadn't seen before, of scarlet silk, stiff and formal yet suited to her youth, with huge sleeves, a tight black and gold embroidered bodice, and long skirt. Her hair was piled high and she walked with an unfamiliar aloofness that was almost hauteur.

His rage went, to be replaced oddly and rather horribly by an emotion he hadn't supposed he would ever feel toward her—a kind of greedy lust. He started forward, slopping his drink.

"Damme, Isabella, but you're a fine woman!"

Incredulously, she stopped and stood still. "*What* did you say?"

He passed his hand across his brow. "I said, 'God, Marion, you're a lovely girl.' "

"I must have misheard you. I really thought. . . I feel so strange, Geoffrey, not myself at all sometimes. You do still love me?"

"Of course I love you. Kiss? That's better. My darling little Marion, don't look so sad, We'll have a nice evening and forget all about this. Right?"

She nodded but her smile was watery, and the next day when he phoned her at three there was no reply although she had told him her driving lesson was in the morning.

Philip looked very comfortable and at home in the armchair by the window, as if he had been there for hours. Perhaps he had. Was it possible that she was out with him, Geoffrey wondered, on all those occasions when he phoned and got no answer?

The dress he had come to hate was stained with mud at the hem as if she had been walking. Her shoes were damp and her hair untidy. Maybe she devoted her mornings to the "very young chap" and her afternoons to this much older one. The husband, he had always heard, was the last to know.

She sat down beside him on the sofa, very close, almost huddled with him. Geoffrey moved slightly aside. What had happened to her gracious ways, that virginal aloofness, which had so taken him when he first saw her in her father's house? And he recalled, while Philip began on some tedious story of Palomede before the square was built, how he had ridden over to Cranstock to call on her father and she had been there with her mother in the drawing room, the gray-brown head and the smooth fair one bent over their work. At a word from her father she had risen, laying aside the embroidery frame, and played to them—oh, so sweetly!—on the harpischord. . .

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He shook himself, sat upright. God, he must have been more tired than he had thought and had actually dozed off. When had she ever done embroidery or played to him anything but records? And where had he got the name Cranstock from? The Craigs lived in Sapley and her father was dead.

The brief dream had been rather unpleasant. He said sharply, "Anyone want a drink?"

"Nothing for me," said Philip.

"Sherry, darling," said Marion. "Did you say a *manor* house, Philip?"

"Remember all these inner suburbs were villages in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, my dear. The Hewsons were lords of the manor of Palomede until the last one sold the estate in 1838."

His ill temper welling, Geoffrey brought their drinks. What right had that fellow to call *his* wife "my dear," and who cared, he thought, returning to catch Philip's words, if some Hewson had been a minor poet or another had held office in Lord Liverpool's government?

"The last one murdered his wife."

"In that garden," said Geoffrey rather nastily, "and they took him up the road to Tyburn and hanged him."

"No, he was never brought to trial, but there was a good deal of talk and he was never again received in society. He married a wife half his age and suspected her of infidelity. She wasn't quite sane—what we'd now call mentally disturbed—and she used to spend hours wandering in the manor gardens. They extended over the whole of this square, of course, and beyond. He accused her of having trysts there with her lovers. All imagination, of course—there was no foundation for it."

Geoffrey said violently, "How can you possibly know that? How can *you* know there was no foundation?"

"My dear Geoff! Because the young lady's diary happens to have come into my hands from a great-niece of hers."

"I wouldn't believe a word of it!"

"Possibly not, but you haven't read it. There's no need to get so cross."

"No, please don't, darling."

He shook off the small hand which touched his sleeve. "Be silent, Marion! You know nothing about such matters and shouldn't talk of them."

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Philip half rose. He said slowly, "And you accuse *me* of being Victorian! What the hell's got into you, Geoffrey? I was simply telling Marion a tale of old Palomede and you fly into a furious temper. I think I'd better go."

"Don't go, Philip. Geoffrey's tired, that's all." Her lips trembled but she said in a steady voice, "Tell us what became of Mr. Hewson and his wife."

The historian said stiffly, "In the end he took her away to Italy where she was drowned."

"You mean *he* drowned her?"

"That's what they said. He took her out in a boat in the Bay of Naples and he came back but she didn't. After that he was blackballed in his clubs and even his own sister wouldn't speak to him."

"What God-awful romantic tripe," said Geoffrey. He was watching his wife, taking in every slatternly detail of her appearance and thinking now of the City banquet he and she were to attend in the week before Christmas. All summer during their engagement he had looked forward to this banquet, perhaps the most significant public occasion of his year, and thought how this time he would have a beautiful young wife to accompany him. But was she beautiful still? Could she, changed and waiflike and vague as she had become, hold her own in the company of those mannered and sophisticated women?

He phoned her on the afternoon of that dim December day, for she had had a slight cold in the morning, had awakened coughing, and he wanted to be sure, firstly that she was well enough to go, and secondly that she would be dressed and ready on time. But the phone rang into emptiness.

Alarmed and apprehensive, he called Philip, who was out, and then the driving school to be told that Mrs. Gilmour's instructor was out too. She couldn't be out with both of them and yet—

He got home by six. It was raining. A trail of wet footmarks led from the elevator to the door of their flat like the prints left by someone who has been called unexpectedly from a bath. And then, even before he saw the damp and draggled figure, still and silent in front of the balcony windows, he knew where she had been, where she had been every day.

But instead of calming his jealousy, this revelation somehow increased it and he began shouting at her, calling her a slut, a failure as a wife, and telling her he regretted their marriage.

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The insults seemed to pass over her. She coughed a little. She said dully, remotely, "You must go alone. I'm not well."

"Of course you're not well, mooning your life away in that foul garden. All right, I'll go alone, but don't be surprised if I don't come back!"

Geoffrey drank more than he would have if she had been with him. A taxi brought him home to Palomede Square just after midnight and he went up in the elevator, not drunk but not quite sober either. He opened their bedroom door and saw that the bed was empty.

There were no lights on in the flat except the hall light which he had just put on himself. She had left him. He picked up the phone to dial her mother's number and then he thought, no, she would go to that driver chap or to Philip.

Philip lived in a flat in the next house. Geoffrey came down the steps into the square and was on the pavement, striding to the next doorway, when he stopped and stared into the garden. At first he thought it was only a pale tree trunk that he could see or a bundle of something dropped behind the stone table. He approached the railings slowly and clasped his hands round the cold wet iron. It was a bundle of clothes, but the clothes enwrapped the seated and utterly still figure of his wife. He began to tremble.

She wore the lilac dress, its skirt sodden with water and clinging to the shape of her legs, and over it her mink coat, soaked and spiky like a rat's pelt. She sat with her hands spread on the table, one gloved, the other bare, her face blank, wax-white, lifted to the rain which fell steadily upon her and dropped sluggishly from the naked branches.

He opened the gate and went up to her without speaking. She recoiled from him but she didn't speak either. He dragged her from the seat and brought her out of the garden and into the house, half carrying her. In the elevator she began to cough, sagging against the wall, water dripping from her hair which hung in draggles under the slackened scarf that wrapped it, water streaming down her face.

Heat met them as he unlocked the door of the flat. Transiently, he thought as he pushed her inside, what have we come to, we who were so happy? A drunken autocrat and a half-crazed slattern. What has come over us?

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The warmth of the radiator against which she leaned made steam rise from her hair and coat. What have we come to, he thought, and then all tender wistfulness vanished, spiraling away down some long corridor of time, taking with it everything that remained of himself and leaving another in possession.

The lamp in the square lit the flat faintly with a sickly yellow radiance. He put on no lights. "I demand an explanation," he said.

"I cannot explain. I have tried to explain it to myself but I cannot." Beneath the coat which she had stripped off, over the soaked and filthy dress, she wore an ancient purple and black wool shawl, moth-eaten into holes.

"What is that repellent garment?"

She fingered it, plucking at the fringes. "It is a shawl. A shawl is a perfectly proper article of dress for a lady to wear."

Her words, her antiquated usage, brought him no astonishment. They sounded natural to his ears.

"Where did you obtain such a thing? Answer me!"

"In the market. It was pretty and I needed a shawl."

He felt his face swell with an onrush of blood. "To be more fitting for your low lover, I daresay? You need not explain why you absent yourself from my household, for I know why. You have assignations in that garden, do you not, with your paramours? With my young coachman and that scribbler fellow Sarson?"

"It is not true," she whispered.

"Do you give me the lie, Isabella? Do you know that I could have a Bill of Divorcement passed in Parliament and rid myself of you? I could keep all your fortune and send you back to your papa at Cranstock."

She came to him and fell on her knees. "Before God, Mr. Hewson, I am your honest wife! I have never betrayed you. Don't send me away, oh don't!"

"Get up." She was clinging to him and he pushed her away. "You have disgraced yourself and me. You have committed the worst sin a woman can commit, you have neglected your duties and brought me into disrepute before my friends." She crept from him, leaving a trail of water drops on the carpet. "I shall think now what I must do," he said. "I want no scandal, mind. Perhaps it will be best if I remove you from this."

"Do not take me from my garden!"

"You are a married woman, Isabella, and have no rights. Pray remember it. What you wish does not signify. I am thinking of my

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reputation in society. Yes, to take you away may be best. Go now and get some rest. I will sleep in my dressing-room and we will tell the servants you are ill so that there may be no gossip. Come, do as I bid you."

She gathered up her wet coat and left the room, crying quietly. The lamp in the square had gone out. He searched for a candle to light him to bed but he could not find one.

Philip Sarson came into the porters' office to collect his morning paper. "A bit brighter today," he said.

"We can do with it, sir, after that rain."

"Mrs. Gilmour not out in the garden this morning?"

"They've gone away, sir. Didn't you know?"

"I haven't seen so much of them lately," said Philip. "Gone away for Christmas, d'you mean?"

"I couldn't say. Seven A.M., they went. I'd only just come on duty." The head porter looked disapproving. "Mr. Gilmour said she was ill but she could walk all right. Tried to get into the garden, she did, only he'd taken the key away from her. She got hold of the gate and he pulled her off very roughlike, I thought. It's not the sort of thing you expect in this class of property."

"Where have they gone? Do you know?"

"They took his car. Italy, I think he said. Yes, it was. I saw Naples on their luggage labels. Are you all right, sir? All of a sudden you look quite ill."

Philip made no reply. He walked down the steps, across the square, and looked through the railings into the garden. A small white glove, sodden and flat as a wet leaf, lay on the seat. He shivered, cursing the writer's imagination that led him into such strange and improbable fancies.

"Q"

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Hugh Pentecost

They'll Kill the Lady

The curtain rises on a gripping situation. The investigation moves at a breakneck pace to its inexorable climax . . . murder, mystery, and menace in the peaceful New England town of Lakeview . . .

It is more than ten years since we last published a story about Uncle George Crowder. Welcome home, Uncle George, retired lawyer-recluse-detective, and your twelve-year-old nephew Joey . . .

Detective: UNCLE GEORGE CROWDER

Many people in the New England town of Lakeview thought of George Crowder as a "character." As a young man George Crowder must have been Adonis-handsome. Now in his late fifties Uncle George, as he was affectionately known in the community, was iron-gray, with deep lines at the corners of his firm mouth and crow's-feet at the eyes, etched there by good humor and compassion.

Long ago George Crowder had been a brilliant lawyer, the county prosecutor, with a political future that seemed to have no limits. But there had come a day when George Crowder had convicted a man on a murder charge, seen him executed by the state, then discovered that the man had been innocent.

George Crowder took full blame for this miscarriage of justice even though no one else believed he'd been at fault. He had prosecuted on the basis of evidence provided by the police—wrong evidence. He resigned his post as prosecutor, dropped the practice of law entirely, and disappeared from Lakeview. No one knew what had happened to him, not even his sister, Esther Trimble, married to the town druggist. Rumor had it that he was drinking himself to death somewhere.

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After several years George Crowder reappeared in town, built himself a shack up in the woods, and lived there with only a setter dog for company. He seemed unwilling to renew old friendships. There was only one person who came and went freely—Joey Trimble, Crowder's twelve-year-old nephew.

To Joey Uncle George was a hero, the wisest man on earth, a man who knew the woods like no one else, who could read a whole story in a broken twig, a scuffled pile of leaves, a muddied stretch of stream, and who was certainly the best man in the world with a gun. And there was Uncle George's setter, Timmy, the best bird dog in the county, maybe in the state, maybe in all fifty states. Uncle George talked to Joey as though the boy was an equal, a grown man. Joey would have walked through hellfire for Uncle George.

In the fall and early winter Joey's visits to the shack in the woods were curtailed. There was school and homework. But on Fridays, after school, Joey did his homework as soon as he got home and then, sometimes after early dark, he took off for Uncle George's and was allowed to stay late. Eventually, when Joey's eyelids grew heavy in spite of himself, Uncle George drove him home in the jeep.

On this Friday evening Uncle George had two large venison steaks ready to broil over the hearth coals. It was a little after seven, already dark, when Timmy, the setter, raised his head and his tail thumped on the hearth rug. Uncle George knew that Joey was coming up the old logging road from the main highway. He and Timmy went out onto the shack's porch and the man lit the approach with his powerful flashlight.

Joey was running, stumbling, up the logging road as if the devil was after him. Uncle George realized that something must be wrong. He and Timmy went to greet the boy.

Joey literally fell, fighting for breath, into Uncle George's arms.

"There's a man lying 'longside the highway, Uncle George—bad hurt," the boy gasped. "Blood all over. It might be a hit-and-run."

"Anyone you know, lad?"

Joey shook his head. "No, sir."

"So, let's move," Uncle George said.

The man went inside the cabin for his corduroy car coat and corduroy hat, then he, Joey, and the dog climbed into the jeep and went hurtling down the logging road. They said in town that Uncle George could handle that jeep like a race driver covering

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the dangerous Baja. How the boy and the dog stayed in it was a small miracle.

The man lying beside the highway was a ghastly sight. Uncle George had stopped the jeep so that its headlights were focused on him. Joey hung back, his face white, as Uncle George knelt beside the blood-stained body.

"Looks like a pig-sticking," Uncle George said.

The injured man lay on his back, his open eyes staring up at the starlit sky. With each anguished beat of his heart, blood pumped out of his mouth. His body looked crushed, almost flattened from back to front.

"Get over to the Andersons', Joey, and call the State Police," Uncle George said. "Tell 'em we need an ambulance in a hell of a hurry." The boy started off. "Take Timmy with you!"

The injured man struggled to say something and more blood came out of his mouth.

"Easy," Uncle George said gently. "We're getting help."

"Got to find George Crowder," the injured man said. It was a bubbling sound.

Uncle George's pale blue eyes were bright and hard. "I'm George Crowder," he said.

The man seemed not to have heard him. "Got to find George Crowder," he said, strangling on his own blood. "They—they'll kill the lady—"

"What lady?" Uncle George asked. If the man was ever going to talk it would have to be now. It seemed cruel to press him, but he was almost certainly not going to make it to the hospital.

"They'll kill the lady," the man said. A great sob shook his mangled body. "Got—to—find—George—Crowder. . ."

They were the last words the man ever spoke. The head turned to one side and the ditch was bloodied.

Tiremarks on the highway told a grim story. Uncle George, Sergeant Stanyer of the State Police, and Red Egan, Lakeview's Sheriff and an old friend of Uncle George's, studied them in the headlights from several cars and the searchlight on the State Trooper's car.

"Crazy man," Red Egan said. "Looks like he was hit—a skidding stop—backup at full power—then ran over him again. Three times in all." The tiremarks showed clear on the black licorice surface of the road.

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"It's unbelievable he lived long enough to speak," Sergeant Stanyer said. "He was looking for you, George?"

"So he said," Uncle George said. "That—and 'they'll kill the lady'."

"What lady?"

"Didn't say." Uncle George's face was like a marble mask. "I don't think he heard me. He didn't know he'd found me."

"You know any lady around here who's likely to be killed?"

"Know one or two who may rate it," Uncle George said. "But not the way this man meant it, I think."

"Not a shred of identification," Stanyer said. "No wallet. Cheap suit could have been bought at a thousand places—and long ago. Can't get any conclusive tiremarks off this blacktop. Doctor may be able to add something."

Uncle George drove a reluctant Joey home, then joined Stanyer and Red Egan at the police barracks. Under bright fluorescent lights Uncle George looked down at the body of the man who'd been trying to find him. Blood had been washed away from the unshaved face. Uncle George stared at it for a long time.

"You ever seen him before, Red?" he asked the Sheriff.

"No." Quite positive.

"Something itches me," Uncle George said. "I'd say 'no' like you, Red, but something bothers me. I'd swear I'd never seen this man—and yet—"

"You're not sure?" Sergeant Stanyer asked.

"Maybe—a long time ago," Uncle George said. "Twenty or thirty years ago—a young man who might have turned out to look like this. But I can't place him."

"I go back as far as you do, George," Red Egan said. "He's not from around here, young or old."

"I could be wrong," Uncle George said.

"Not your habit," Red Egan said. "Maybe it'll come back to you."

"Maybe."

"On the table is everything he was carrying," Stanyer said. "Two one-dollar bills and sixty-four cents in change. Cigarettes and a packet of matches."

Uncle George picked up the matchbook. Matchbooks are used for advertising, sometimes by local bars, restaurants, and shops. This one carried a national ad for an underarm deodorant. No indication of where it came from.

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"The driver could have been some drunk—or some guy on drugs," Stanyer said. "He hit the guy by accident, saw he wasn't dead, was afraid he might be identified, so he backed up and ran over him a couple more times to make sure."

Uncle George was fiddling with the matchbook. "He was looking for me to tell me 'they'll kill the lady'," he said. "I'd say it looks more as if they were trying to stop him from doing just that—telling me." He opened the matchbook and his eyes narrowed. "You miss this?" he asked Stanyer, and handed him the matches. "Telephone number written inside it."

"Local," Stanyer said.

A few minutes later Stanyer had the information. The number belonged to a Mrs. and Mrs. Joshua Clement of Lakeview.

"Big place over on South Mountain. You know it, George. The Clements are in Europe and their phone is temporarily disconnected."

"So our dead friend couldn't reach them if he tried," Uncle George said. "Who, I wonder, put him on to me?" He glanced at Stanyer. "I don't think I can buy your drunken hit-and-run driver who panicked, Sergeant. This man was on his way to find me. Someone must have given him directions, because he was only a few yards from the logging road that would have taken him straight to my place. That means he talked to somebody local. Could be a start."

"You were supposed to help him stop a killing," Red Egan said. " 'They'll kill the lady.' Why, since you don't know him, George, would he be looking to you for help and not me or the State Troopers?"

"You got a reputation, Mr. Crowder," Stanyer said.

"I had a reputation a long time ago," Uncle George said. His mouth tightened. "I wish I knew what bugs me about that face."

"Maybe this guy knew you knew this 'lady'," Stanyer said. "Looking for you because he knew you were her friend."

Uncle George shook his head.

"More likely he'd heard you'd help anybody in trouble," Red Egan said.

"Some stronger tie-in than that in his mind, I think," Uncle George said. "Some connection I can't make—not yet."

"Meanwhile there can be a lady in big trouble," Red Egan said.

One of the worst things about growing older, Uncle George

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thought, was that your memory begins to play tricks on you. In particular you begin to forget names. He had comforted himself by the thought that his memory bank got so full that it discarded the unimportant. The dead man's face had been ejected from his memory because it no longer mattered. Now it mattered, but he couldn't bring the face into focus.

He was up at daylight and back at the scene of the accident—rather, the murder, because that was what it must have been. What a brutal business! The man had been walking hurriedly along the road, having got directions from someone. Just a few yards from the logging road a car had come up behind him. He must not have expected danger from it. The car ran him down, stopped, backed up, ran forward in another crushing assault, backed again, then ran over him a final time and took off into the night. Deliberate, cold-blooded murder.

All this to stop the man from finding George Crowder and telling him about a lady who was going to be killed. The lady couldn't be far away. She had to be in Lakeview or nearby. George Crowder couldn't have been expected to give emergency help to someone far away. If the lady was here in Lakeview, and still unharmed, then the man or men who had driven the murder car must also still be near.

Uncle George raised his head as if he could sense them or smell them on the morning air. In the woods you listened and listened and finally you heard something. Out here on the highway the sounds were mechanical, the air polluted by carbon monoxide.

The Andersons lived about a hundred yards from the murder scene. It was to their house Joey had run to get help the night before. Uncle George stopped there and got his first bit of concrete information. Yes, a stranger had knocked on their back door a little after dark, asking for the way to George Crowder's shack. They'd told him the logging road was "just a piece further," Nothing odd about the stranger, except that he was walking. In the country everybody rides in some kind of vehicle.

Uncle George told them what had happened to the man. They were shocked.

"We did hear some tires squealin' right after he left," Fred Anderson said. "But there's a corner just beyond here, George, and tires squealin' ain't unusual. Kids all drive like hell these days."

"Someone from hell was driving that car," Uncle George said.

Joey, Uncle George knew, would be bursting with curiosity

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about the night before. Also, there would be a pot of fresh coffee on his sister Esther's stove. He drove the jeep to the Trimble house with Timmy, the setter, sitting upright like a human passenger on the seat beside him. The boy came running across the lawn before he and Timmy could climb out of the jeep.

"Not one word until your mom has poured me a cup of coffee," Uncle George said.

When Esther had provided him with coffee and a piece of homemade cake Uncle George gave a detailed account of everything that had happened to date.

"It's not a nice thing to ask," he said to his sister, "but I wonder if you'd mind coming down to the undertaker's and taking a look at the dead man?"

"George!"

"Might be someone we grew up with, Esther. So help me, I can't place him, but I've got the nagging feeling that—"

"Uncle George!" Joey had something to say he couldn't hold in any more. "About the Clements' place. They may be in Europe, but there's someone staying in the house. A lady."

Uncle George turned his head. "Say that again, lad."

"There's a lady staying in the Clements' house. Eddie Hanson's trying to sell magazine subscriptions. He gets some kind of special school prize if he sells the most. I biked around with him for a while day before yesterday. We were riding by the Clements' place, not planning to stop because Eddie knew they were in Europe. But we saw smoke coming out of the fireplace chimney, so we thought maybe they were back. We rode up to the front door and rang the bell and this lady answered and—"

"What lady, Joey?"

"Search me. I never saw her before, Uncle George. She was real nice, but she didn't want any magazines."

"Did she explain what she was doing there?"

"Just said she was staying in the house while the owners were abroad."

"The Clements probably wanted someone in the house," Esther said.

"They've got a caretaker," Joey said. "Old Mr. Bohrer."

"He doesn't live in," Esther said. She looked at Uncle George. "You think she might be the 'lady they'll kill'?"

"No reason to think so," Uncle George said. "But tell me what she looked like, Joey."

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"Well, she's older than Mom. Maybe as old as you, Uncle George."

Esther laughed. "An old lady of fifty-two or -three."

"Did she tell you her name, Joey?"

"No, sir. And we had no reason to ask."

"Well, there's no use stewing over it, George," Esther said. "Mike Bohrer can tell you who she is and what she's doing there."

"I think I'll find out," Uncle George said.

Joey was added to the jeep's passenger list. They found old Mike Bohrer sitting on the post-office steps waiting for the mail to be sorted. In his salad days old Mike had been one of the best logging men in the state. He'd worked for the Lakeview Lumber Company most of his life, but arthritis and the years had slowed him down. He now mowed lawns, worked in gardens, and did odd jobs.

Mike was glad to see Uncle George. They called each other a few affectionate names and chatted a little about this and that, mostly about how much Mike envied Uncle George that setter dog, "settin' up in the jeep seat like a human bein'."

"I hear you got someone staying at the Clements' house," Uncle George said.

"Yep," Mike said, not very interested. "Friend of the folks, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well, would she be stayin' there if she wasn't a friend? A Mrs. Chandler. Nice enough woman."

"The Clements invited her to stay in the house while they were gone?"

"Well, I suppose they did. Anyway, I had my instructions from Steve Randall. He's Josh Clement's lawyer, you know."

"Steve told you this Mrs. Chandler was going to stay in the house?"

"What's eatin' you?" Mike asked. "Never knowed you to be so nosey. You want all the i's dotted and the t's crossed? Steve didn't tell me anything. He wrote me a letter from Washington where he was—told me the Clements wanted me to open up the house for this Mrs. Chandler." He winked at Uncle George. "You got an eye out for her? She's kinda cute."

Joey snorted. Mrs. Chandler was an old lady of 52 or 53.

"It looks like a dead end, Joey," Uncle George said, as they took

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off for the Randall place at the far end of town.

You couldn't equate violence with Steven Randall. He was one of Uncle George's oldest friends. They'd graduated from law school together. Everyone thought George Crowder was the one who was going to make it big, but things had happened to him. Now Steve Randall was the town's celebrity. If you could believe the Gallup poll he was going to be the next Senator from the state and people said that in another six years he could well be living in the White House.

Uncle George hadn't seen much of his old friend in the last few years. Randall was a national figure, traveling around the country, preparing for the big pitch that lay ahead. Uncle George had become, at least, a part-time recluse. He couldn't recall how long ago it was he'd gone up to the big house on the hill where Steve Randall lived when he was home.

One reason for the fading of the friendship was Amy Randall, Steve's wife. Steve had married money and social position, some thought for what it would do for his political ambitions. Amy was what Uncle George called "image conscious." When Uncle George got into his trouble, way back, Amy had made it quite clear she considered his friendship with Steve Randall could only be harmful. Steve tried to explain, tried to see his friend on the side, but it was too difficult, too complicated. So they had drifted apart. And people said the Randalls' marriage had done some drifting, too. As he drove up the hill to the big house, Uncle George wondered what kind of reception he would get.

He left Joey and the setter in the jeep and approached the front door of the old Colonial house. He was reaching for the wrought-iron knocker when the door opened and he found himself faced by a young man in a natty sports jacket. He had dark hair and rather hostile dark eyes.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"I'd like to see Mr. Randall," Uncle George said.

"I'm afraid it isn't possible," the man said. "I'm Avery Tyler, Mr. Randall's executive secretary. If you'll tell me your business?"

"I'm an old friend, George Crowder. Just wanted a word or two with Mr. Randall."

There was flat refusal in Tyler's eyes, but a strong voice called out from behind him. "Who is it, Avery?"

"Steve!" Uncle George shouted. "It's George Crowder."

"George!"

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Avery Tyler was swept away and a big handsome man with blond hair and a happy, smiling face took Uncle George in a bearhug of greeting. His eyes were a candid blue and bright with pleasure.

"You old sonofagun!" Steve Randall said. "Where the hell have you been keeping yourself?" He turned to his secretary. "Best damned lawyer you'll ever encounter, Avery. Best damned friend, too." He looked out at the jeep. "That Esther's boy?"

"Growing like a weed," Uncle George said. "Look, friend, I gather you're busy. I've got what may not be a problem at all and you might help me forget it."

"Well, come in, man!"

"I'm a little pressured for time, Steve." In a few terse sentences he told Randall about the murder victim of the night before and the victim's disjointed words before he died. "We found a matchbook on him and written inside the cover was Josh Clement's phone number. That phone's disconnected, but Joey happened to know that your Mrs. Chandler is staying at the house."

Randall's face clouded. "*My* Mrs. Chandler? Who the hell is Mrs. Chandler?"

"Mrs. Chandler is the woman you wrote Mike Bohrer about, telling him she was to be allowed to use the house."

"You've got something by the wrong end, George. I never wrote to Mike Bohrer about a Mrs. Chandler or anything else. Somebody's putting something over on somebody. We better see what's going on up there."

"I could do that for you, Mr. Randall," Tyler said. "You've got that speech to finish writing."

"To hell with the speech," Randall said. "I'll do better talking off the top of my head anyway. You've seen this woman, George?"

"No, but Joey did, trying to sell her magazines." Uncle George's mouth twitched. "She's an old lady of fifty-two or -three."

"If she says I wrote a letter for her to Mike Bohrer she's an old liar of fifty-two or -three. Let's go find out what she's up to. Get my car, will you, Avery?"

The lines in Uncle George's face seemed to be more deeply etched than normal. "If you have time we might stop at the mortuary on the way, Steve. I'd like you to look at the dead man. I have the feeling I've seen him before but I can't pinpoint him."

"Sure. It's on the way."

Tyler drove a fire-engine-red Mercedes up to the front door.

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"We'll tag along behind you, Steve," Uncle George said.

Tyler still sat behind the wheel of the car.

"I won't need you, Avery," Randall said. "We've got that phone call coming from Washington. Tell 'em I'll be back in an hour or so."

They drove into town and stopped at the undertaker's. Inside they were shown the body of the murdered man. Randall, scowling, stared down at it for a long time.

"This man's name is Fred Wicks, George. You've seen him before—three or four times, I'd guess. It was a long time ago. He used to run a little lunch counter in New Haven when we were in law school. I remember a few times when we'd been studying late we went around the corner to his place for a sandwich and a glass of milk. He was just a kid then."

Thirty-odd years ago! The face of a scrawny kid swam into Uncle George's memory, a kid with a fresh mouth presiding over greasy hamburgers.

"I have reason to remember him better than you, George," Randall said. "We both enlisted in the navy the day after Pearl Harbor, took our training together, served on the same destroyer for a while. We got separated halfway through the war and I don't think I ever saw him again."

"Why would he be looking for me to help him instead of you?" Uncle George asked.

"If he knew you lived in this town he'd remember you were a lawyer."

"Maybe we can figure it out later," Uncle George said. "Right now I find myself concerned about your Mrs. Chandler."

"Not my Mrs. Chandler!" Randall said.

It was about a ten-minute drive to the Clement's place. Randall drove the red Mercedes right up to the front door. Uncle George parked the jeep a little distance away and told Joey and the setter to stay put. He felt a curious tension. He stopped and turned back to the boy.

"You see or hear anyone coming, Joey, blow the horn."

"Yes, sir."

"Especially anyone coming out of the woods."

"Yes, sir."

"And after you blow the horn you and Timmy duck out of sight. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

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Uncle George turned and headed for the house. He was about 15 yards from where Randall was waiting when the front door opened and a woman appeared. Some old woman of fifty-two or -three! She had the lush figure of a thirty-year-old woman in her prime. Her hair was red, probably not natural, but beautifully groomed. She had wide brown eyes and a generous mouth, and when she saw Randall her whole face seemed to light up like a kid's at Christmas.

"Steve!" she said. "I was beginning to think you were never coming."

Randall looked stunned. Then, in a broken voice, he said, "Maggie! Dear Maggie! What in God's name are you doing here?" She might not be his Mrs. Chandler, but he took her in his arms and held her very close.

Uncle George turned to go away. Whatever the problem was, Steve Randall could handle it now. Uncle George felt he was intruding on some kind of special privacy, yet instinct told him that there was danger somewhere around him, somewhere nearby. He was reluctant to stay, even more reluctant to go.

"George!" Randall's voice was sharp. "Please, George, don't leave."

Uncle George turned back. Steve Randall, his arm still around the smiling woman, offered an explanation. "I wasn't lying to you, George. I don't know why Maggie is calling herself Mrs. Chandler."

"Because I am Mrs. Chandler," the woman said, in a pleasant, husky voice.

"You're married, Maggie?"

"You didn't keep track of me, Steve," the woman said. "I was married. To a nice guy, a commercial airline pilot who made the mistake of piloting his ship into the side of a mountain. But what is the problem, Steve? I was about to call you in spite of the instructions in your letter. I thought something must have gone wrong, so I—"

"What do you mean, my letter, Maggie? I never wrote you any letter."

Randall and the woman stared at each other.

"I think it might be advisable to go inside," Uncle George said. He felt the small hairs prickling on the back of his neck.

They went into the house, into the pine-paneled living room.

"Do you still have the letter you say I wrote you, Maggie?"

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andall asked. He was all business now.

"Of course I have it," Maggie Chandler said. She went over to a eather shoulder bag that was resting on the desk. She took a let- er out of the bag and handed it to Randall.

Randall frowned at it. "My stationery," he said. "Postmarked ashington, D.C.—one week ago." He opened the envelope. "My tterhead." He read quickly, his frown deepening. Finally he oked up at the woman. "I never wrote this, Maggie." He held ie letter out to Uncle George.

"You sure you want me to read it, Steve?" Uncle George asked.

"Of course I want you to read it—the damned thing is a fake."

Uncle George read the typed letter: "My very dear Maggie:—I m in deep trouble and you may be the only person who can help ie out of it. I know when I ask for help that I can count on you. I nclose five one-hundred-dollar bills to cover your traveling ex- enses. You will please come to Lakeview and take a taxi to the ome of Joshua Clement. The Clements are away, but I've ar- anged for their caretaker to open the house for you.

"I may not get to you right away, Maggie. Don't call me. Just ait for me to show up. I wouldn't ask this if my whole future asn't at stake. Please don't let me down. My very best love to ou, Maggie. Steve."

Uncle George glanced at the envelope. It was addressed to Mrs. oseph Chandler, Miami Beach, Florida.

"I didn't know Maggie had married," Randall said. "How could I now her married name or where she was living?"

"If this is a phony," Uncle George said, "then you can count on t that the letter to Mike Bohrer was sent by the same person—on our stationery, Steve."

"I've always followed your career, Steve," Maggie said. "I sup- osed the trouble you mentioned had to do with—well, with long go."

"I did not write the letter!" Randall said. "I am not in any trou- le!"

"I have the feeling you're in very big trouble, Steve," Uncle eorge said. "What did happen long ago? What did Fred Wicks ave to do with it?"

"Freddie Wicks?" Maggie said. "What about him?"

"He was murdered here in Lakeview last night," Uncle George aid. "You people want to talk to me? If not, you'd better handle it ourselves."

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They wanted to talk, and it was a strange story. Maggie Chandler told her part of it, looking steadily at Uncle George. Thirty years ago she had been working in a bordello in Panama City. The customers had been almost entirely navy personnel—young men far away from home, lonely, often a little frightened. Taking care of their loneliness had seemed almost a patriotic duty.

"I was one of those boys," Steve said in a hard, flat voice. "Could you believe I fell in love with Maggie?"

"Easily," Uncle George said.

Randall's ship was stationed at Panama City for several months. Fred Wicks was in that crew and he also patronized the bordello. One night there was a riot. A drunken sailor started to take the place apart. In the melee that followed, the sailor was knifed, killed. Military police came charging in.

"Maggie got us out of there, Fred Wicks and me," Randall said. "Down a back alley to another part of town—to her own apartment. It saved us from a court-martial, possibly a murder charge."

Maggie had never gone back to the bordello. She was in love too. She and Randall lived together until his ship moved on. They had written to each other for a while, but the war had gone on for another four years and their love affair had died. They had seen each other once more, about a year after peace, and had mutually agreed there was no way to put it together again.

"I was still in love," Maggie said quietly. "But I knew I could never fit into Steve's lifestyle."

That was it. That was all of it, they told Uncle George.

"How much could this story hurt your political career, Steve?" Uncle George asked.

"Not much—not at all, I think. There was no crime that really involved me. I was a kid of twenty-one serving my country. My affair with Maggie?" Randall shrugged. "Thousands of boys had less than permanent relationships in those days."

"But if it was made to look as though there was something more? If now there was a crime?"

"I don't follow you, George."

"If you brought the lady here, hid her away from your wife Amy, and then—"

"Then what?"

"'They'll kill the lady,' Wicks said. Having got what she believed was a genuine letter from you, Steve, Mrs. Chandler comes here. She follows instructions and just waits. But sooner or later

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when you didn't get in touch, she'd have called you. You'd have come running and killed the lady to protect yourself from scandal."

"You're crazy!" Randall said.

"You misunderstand. It would *look* as though you'd killed the lady. She would be dead, shot with your gun. There'd be the letter."

"*My* gun?"

"The person who could steal your stationery could easily steal a gun from you. You used to collect guns when I first knew you, Steve. So they'd have you cold. You could deny till you were blue in the face that you didn't write to Maggie or to Mike Bohrer. When the Panama City story came out no one in the world would believe you. You'd lured Mrs. Chandler here to kill her, to keep her quiet."

"But who knew the Panama story?" Randall asked.

"Fred Wicks, of course. Knew it all from top to bottom. Found someone who would pay him handsomely for it. We have a new look at political methods these days. Your enemies were willing to buy what Wicks had to sell, but they must have agreed with you, Steve, that the story itself wouldn't do you much harm. But if they could build on it—?"

"But why kill Fred Wicks?"

"It's a guess," Uncle George said. "He was willing enough to sell you out, Steve, but when he discovered the plan involved murder—killing Maggie—he couldn't go along with it. He was afraid to see you, Steve, but he remembered me, your friend, a lawyer. He was on his way to tell me about it when they caught up with him and ran him down."

"And who are 'they,' George?"

Uncle George shrugged. "You know who your enemies are better than I do, Steve. They have to be here in the Lakeview area, of course. Country people don't lock their houses. It would be simple enough to steal some of your stationery and one of your guns."

"But can we prove anything against anyone?" Randall asked.

"If you've got the guts," Uncle George said. "They must still think they can pull it off."

"We've got the guts," Maggie said.

She was quite a woman, Uncle George thought. "They can't stall any longer if they're going to make their plan work," he

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said. "They know you've headed here with me. There's just a chance we won't have figured it out. So when I leave they close in on you two. I actually become a witness for them. You were here, you probably told me the Panama City story. I'd have to testify to both those facts. Then after I've left, you kill Maggie. There'll be somebody nearby who hears the shots and before you can do anything they've got you. Cold."

"What do you want us to do, Mr. Crowder?" Maggie asked quietly.

"I leave," Uncle George said. "I set it up for them just the way they want it. You risk being alone for a little bit. Then I come back."

"You can't be sure you'll be back in time," Randall said.

"I can make an awfully good try," Uncle George said. "But as I said, it will take guts to risk it. There's nobody nearby right now. The boy's watching. He'd have signaled me if he'd even caught a glimpse of anyone."

Randall put his arm around Maggie. "We'll risk it," he said.

Uncle George went out to the jeep and joined Joey and the dog. "I'm going to drive down to the first turn in the road, Joey, and then I'm heading off into the brush. You and Timmy will lie low there till I come back."

"What's up, Uncle George?"

"I hope I run into a killer."

They started down the driveway to the front gates. Just as they were about to head out onto the highway an old station wagon confronted them. It was Mike Bohrer. Uncle George flagged him down.

"You headed for the Clements'?" he asked.

"I check the place every day," old Mike said.

"Well, everything's all right up there," Uncle George said. "Steve Randall's visiting with Mrs. Chandler. I don't think you need to check today." The old man's presence might hold up the killer or head him off.

"If you say so, George," old Mike said. "Give me time to pour a couple of beers at the Falcon."

The Falcon was a roadside café about a mile away. Old Mike was a customer at most of the drinking spots around Lakeview. He turned the station wagon north on the highway. Uncle George headed south toward town.

"He was probably just as glad not to go up there," Joey said.

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"Not too fond of work, I imagine," Uncle George said.

"It's not that, Uncle George. He and Mr. Randall don't get on at all. It was Mr. Randall got him fired from the lumber company before he had a pension coming. Some of the kids say Mr. Randall caught him stealing, let him off, but got him fired."

The jeep was suddenly in the ditch and Uncle George was climbing out. He reached in the back for the shotgun he always carried there.

"You just may have saved a life, Joey. Now, you're not to move unless you hear shooting. If you hear a gun you're to run like hell for help."

"But, Uncle George—"

"No time to explain, lad. Just do as you're told."

Uncle George could move through the woods with almost animal quiet. He came to the edge of the growth of trees bordering on the lawn that fronted the house. He saw what he expected to see. Old Mike Bohrer was approaching the house from the north boundary and he was carrying a rifle. He seemed to be heading toward the back door of the house.

Uncle George circled the other way, running low and fast. As he turned the corner of the house he saw old Mike with his hand on the back door. Uncle George raised the shotgun to his shoulder.

"You'd better hold it right where you are, Mike, and drop that rifle unless you want me to blow your head off where you stand," Uncle George called out.

Old Mike turned, his face working. He dropped the rifle on the grass.

"God almighty, George, you scared the hell out of me. I just came back to—"

"I know what you came back for, Mike. Now shut up, or at least keep your voice down." Uncle George moved forward and picked up the rifle. "Mighty expensive gun for you to own, Mike. Belongs to Mr. Randall, doesn't it?"

Old Mike looked as though his legs were going to give way under him.

"Let's see how she sounds," Uncle George said. He pointed the rifle skyward and fired it three times. The shots echoed and re-echoed down the valley. "Now, quick into the house, old man, quick!"

Uncle George went into the kitchen, hanging onto old Mike. He

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pushed open the swing door that led into the main part of the house.

He saw Steve Randall and Maggie clinging to each other.

"Everything's okay," he said. "Quick, Maggie. I want you out here. And you, Steve, play it like a guilty man. Hurry, please, Maggie."

She came without question and the door closed.

"That miserable old hulk over there was meant to be the triggerman. But I think our Number One boy is running across the front lawn right now," Uncle George said. He opened the swing door just a crack.

At that moment Avery Tyler, in his smart sports jacket, came running in from the front door.

"Oh, my God, Mr. Randall, I heard shots!" he said.

Randall just stared at him.

"I was afraid you'd do something desperate. That's why I tried to keep it from you that she was here. I tried to buy her off but she wouldn't listen to me. Is she dead?"

"You miserable worm," Randall said, in a toneless voice.

"A very good scene, but it might become a bit too corny if it's continued," Uncle George said, coming into the room and pushing old Mike ahead of him. "You've been waiting outside there quite a while—with your friend—for those shots to be fired, haven't you, Tyler? Unfortunately for you I fired those shots—into the air. If you were any kind of a countryman you'd have known those shots were fired outdoors and not in the house. Okay, Maggie, you can join the party."

She came in from the kitchen, cool, unruffled. Tyler looked about to collapse.

"I'm going to take these two in," Uncle George said. "Citizen's arrest. I hope, Steve, that Maggie can help you prepare yourself for the next shock."

"Shock?"

"Take a look out those French windows, Steve."

Randall went to the windows. A woman stood at the end of the garden, gripping the top of a white picket fence.

"My wife!" Randall said.

"Waiting out there for Tyler to tell her it's all worked out just the way the two of them planned it."

"Amy and Tyler?"

"When I saw her waiting out there, Steve, I had to conclude

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there was nothing political about this at all. Woman in her forties, eager for the attentions of a young stud like Tyler. When Fred Wicks came to Tyler with his story, thinking he could blackmail you, Steve, he showed them the way. Your wife had the money to pay Wicks handsomely. But there were too many people involved—Wicks, who got squeamish, and old Mike who held a grudge and wanted his pension money. Your wife could take care of him, too. Now, with the ship sinking, they'll talk their heads off and probably make Tyler the villain."

"So help me God, Mr. Crowder—" Tyler began.

"You're going to need His help, friend," Uncle George said grimly.

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